BHANU SRIVASTAV

DEIFIED

THE LEGACY OF YESTERDAY

"Deified The Legacy of Yesterday will crack open your soul" – ZEE NEWS

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THE LEGACY OF YESTERDAY

THIS STORY
~~IS BASED ON TRUE EVENTS~~
IS A WORK OF FICTION...

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
THE SUPERGIRL HIMANI WHO INSPIRED
ME, AS WELL AS ALL THE
SUPERGIRLS WHO INSPIRE THIS
WORLD.

यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवता।
यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः।।
- मनुस्मृति ३/५६

जहाँ स्त्रियों की पूजा होती है वहाँ देवता निवास करते हैं और
जहाँ स्त्रियों की पूजा नहीं होती है, उनका सम्मान नहीं
होता है वहाँ किये गये समस्त अच्छे कर्म निष्फल हो जाते हैं।
- मनुस्मृति ३/५६

Where women are worshiped and honored, there dwell
the Gods, and divinity blossoms. Wherever they are
dishonored, all actions, no matter how noble
they may be, remain unfruitful.
- Manusmriti Verse 3/56

The Manusmriti (Sanskrit: मनुस्मृति) was an ancient legal text attributed to King Manu, serving as a rulebook for the citizens of his kingdom. This metrical text, written in Sanskrit, was variously dated to be from the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd century CE. It presented itself as a discourse given by Manu (Svayambhuva) and Bhrigu on topics related to dharma, including duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues, and more. Notably, it was one of the first Sanskrit texts to have been translated into English in 1776 by Sir William Jones.

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Prologue

Just fifty-five kilometers from the busy chaos of Delhi, in the quiet, unhurried town of Jhajjar, Haryana, a newborn's cry pierced the stillness of dawn. The doctor, her face glistening with sweat, smiled warmly. "Congratulations, you have a daughter," she said, her voice filled with joy at the miracle of new life.

The nurse gently placed the tiny infant into her mother's—Asha's—waiting arms. Asha's eyes, shimmering with tears, gazed at her daughter's face. Wisps of brown hair framed the baby's head, and her deep, dark eyes seemed to hold a world of promise. The mother held her close, her heart swelling with a silent vow to always protect and cherish her child.

The doctor turned to her assistant, a young nurse with wide eyes and a quick step. "Fetch her husband," she instructed.

The nurse hurried out and soon returned with Surendra, whose eyes were shining with happiness and gratitude. He approached the bed, his hands trembling, his gaze locked on the small, swaddled figure. As he took his daughter into his arms, a tear slipped down his cheek. "We'll name her Saanvi," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "After the goddess Lakshmi. She is our precious gift."

Years passed, and Saanvi's brilliance began to shine. In the classroom, her hand was always the first to shoot up, her answers precise and thoughtful. Teachers often found themselves smiling at her eagerness, and classmates gravitated toward her, drawn by her kindness and the way she made everyone feel seen.

She moved through life with a gentle grace, her soft-spoken words and kind actions leaving a trail of warmth in her wake. Yet deep

down, Saanvi had her own struggles. At night, when everything was quiet, she would sit by her window and look at the stars, her mind filled with dreams and worries. She dreamed of success, eager to make her parents proud, but often battled insecurities, fearing she wasn't good enough. The weight of expectations pressed heavily on her young shoulders.

Despite her inner struggles, Saanvi's spirit remained unbroken. She faced each day with a smile that could light up the darkest room, her kindness flowing like a river, nourishing everyone around her.

Saanvi's beauty was not just in her appearance but in the way she touched lives—her soul shining brightly, a ray of hope and love. She was a radiant soul, too brilliant for this world. In short, Saanvi was a once-in-a-lifetime girl.

However, her marriage changed the course of her fate. What began as an auspicious union with a wealthy software engineer soon proved that even the brightest light can be dimmed by life's storms. The day Saanvi left her home was the day her destiny took a turn. From that moment on, the choices she made would shape her path, now and forever...

An ache as old as time, a heart that gives more love than the one it feels, an ace of hearts torn in half...

Chapter 1

Ace of Hearts

Destiny—that is what I am, an elusive force that stalks the corridors of time, cloaked in shadows woven from the unknown. In the cosmic theatre, I emerge as the enigmatic puppeteer, orchestrating the intricate dance of lives with a touch that sends shivers down mortal spines. My presence is a suspenseful whisper in the winds of fate, a harbinger of the unseen and the unfathomable...

Wait a minute—these are all lies spread by humans.

In reality, I'm nothing but a mere mirage, a figment of imagination, devoid of existence and the power to decree anyone's journey. "Destiny" is a construct born from human need, a convenient scapegoat to shoulder the blame when things go awry. Let me paint a clearer picture for you...

When a weak student flunks an exam, it's the teacher's fault for setting a tough paper. When someone fails to secure

a job, it's the government's fault. When corrupt leaders fail to deliver on their promises, it's the fault of the economy, the media, or neighboring countries. And when all else fails, they blame me—Destiny. I exist because humans refuse to accept responsibility for their own shortcomings.

Occasionally, humanity reveals its extraordinary essence, and rare souls emerge that captivate my heart. In the vast expanse of eternity, I observed the unfolding tale of such a spirited soul.

So, let's rewind the time and let me tell you a fascinating tale from its start, where magic begins...

Her name was Saanvi, a slender young girl of no more than twenty-seven, with a narrow face that exuded an understated charm. Saanvi's fair skin, accented by a subtle rosy tint upon her cheeks, and her smile—like a pebble cast into a still pond—sent ripples through the observer's veins.

Her eyes, a rich brown reminiscent of molten chocolate, outshone even the brightest stars in the night sky. Her silky hair, cascading down her back like a honey-colored waterfall, was a marvel in itself. Each strand seemed to capture the light, transforming it into a thousand tiny prisms.

Whether styled into a sleek bun or left to flow freely, her hair revealed different facets of her beauty. But it was when left unbound, free from pins or clips, that her true allure emerged. Her open hair framed her face like a halo, accentuating the gentle curves of her jawline and the sparkle in her eyes. Saanvi, with her hair cascading down her back, resembled a goddess stepping out of a celestial mural—breathtaking and untamed.

But the most mesmerizing sight wasn't just her hair itself. It was the way she touched it—a language only she understood. Her fingers would gracefully brush away a strand that dared to fall across her cheek, tucking it behind her ear with practiced ease. Each movement was a silent conversation between her and her hair, a magic trick performed for the world to witness.

It felt as though she were the amour of all the novels, the heroine of all the plays, the vague 'she' of all the poetry ever written in this world. In this era of relationship status updates, she was like a three-page-long love letter.

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Varanasi, 23rd May 2023

A network of rupees flows through the veins of India, carrying with it the dreams of farmers, the aspirations of students, the growth of businesses, and the sweat of generations. Banks—the beating heart of this network—circulate a lifeblood of opportunity and progress.

A mix of excitement and apprehension welled up within Saanvi as she approached the administrative office. She had been transferred from the Bolpur Branch to the Administrative Office of NextGen Bank in Varanasi. The thrill of starting her journey here mingled with uncertainties about her department, team dynamics, and workload.

Upon entering the office, Saanvi noticed that only a few staff members had arrived. It seemed she was earlier than expected. She patiently waited, taking in the details of her surroundings. Soon enough, she made her way to the HRM Wing to record her attendance using a biometric device.

After waiting a bit longer, the HRM officer and Saanvi finally reached a door with a brass plaque that read "Administrative Office Head." The officer knocked gently, then ushered Saanvi inside. Her heart hammered against her ribs like a frantic bird trapped in a cage.

Behind a large mahogany desk sat Mr. Radha Krishnan Reddy. He had a kind face and gentle eyes, and his warm smile instantly put Saanvi at ease. His desk, like a seasoned campaigner's tent, was filled with stories of countless deals, meticulous calculations, and wisdom passed down to eager young bankers.

"Welcome, Saanvi," Mr. Reddy said. "I'm glad you're here. We're excited to have you join our team."

"Thank you, sir!" she replied, relieved. She had been nervous about joining the Administrative Office, but Mr. Reddy's friendly demeanor made her feel welcome.

In the administrative office, Radha Krishnan Reddy was more than a leader; he was a weathered sage. His silvered hair, neatly groomed, held tales of monsoon rains and the soft toll of temple bells. His eyes, with the color of well-brewed Irani chai, sparkled with a hint of mischief, revealing a depth beneath his serious demeanor. Time had etched a map of experience on his face, each wrinkle serving as a symbol of battles fought and wisdom gained in the field of banking.

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Guided by the whims of fate, Saanvi found herself under the benevolent wing of the IT team, a group of minds entrusted with the intricate dance of data and strategy. It was here that she first encountered her colleagues in this administrative office: Ankita Banerjee, a young officer on probation, and Ram Kumar Jaiswal, a seasoned manager.

As she approached the IT Wing, she was met by Ankita first. They chatted about each other, their previous postings, and more.

"Saanvi, did you meet Ram Kumar sir?" asked Ankita.

"No, not yet..." replied Saanvi calmly.

Pointing towards Mr. Kumar's cubicle, Ankita advised, "That's his cubicle. He's the Section Head of the IT Team in this Administrative Office."

"Okay, thanks, Ankita," Saanvi replied before heading towards the cubicle.

Ram Kumar Jaiswal, an experienced navigator in the sea of finance, had led the IT Wing as its manager well into his fifties. Stepping into his cubicle, Saanvi felt her nerves on edge.

His desk resembled a battlefield of paper stacks, each document a fallen soldier in the war against inefficiency. Seated behind it on a swivel chair that creaked with every movement, Mr. Kumar awaited her.

With a round face resembling a full moon peeking from behind a mountain of papers, he sat atop a surprisingly short frame. His complexion, slightly darker than the teakwood furniture, hinted at years spent under the blazing sun. Spectacles perched on his nose frequently slipped down as he spoke or worked in front of the computer. Every few minutes, they performed a comical slide down his nose, only to be absentmindedly pushed back up.

And then, there was his speech—the lilt, the melody. It wasn't quite Hindi, but something earthier, more rooted, like Bhojpuri.

"Welcome, Saanvi," he said, his voice a low rumble that resonated deep in her chest. "We've been waiting for you."

Saanvi, her mind functioning like a well-oiled machine, assembled the puzzle. Her first clue came from his accent. He appeared to be from Bihar or Jharkhand. Since both Bihar and Jharkhand were equidistant from the administrative office, she swiftly calculated the probability of each choice leading to a favorable outcome. The probability of selecting either state was equal—50 percent. With care, she made a calculated guess, trusting her instinct that he might be from Jharkhand.

In Jharkhand, there were mainly three places where the chances of his origin could be: Ranchi, Dumka, and Deoghar. He might have been from Dumka or Deoghar, but not Ranchi because Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand, had a distinct regional dialect—a mix of Hindi and various tribal languages. The regional dialect of Ranchi was heavily influenced by Magahi and Bengali. Mr. Ram Kumar's speech lacked this local flavor, so Ranchi was out of the three options.

Both Deoghar and Dumka shared a similar linguistic landscape in Jharkhand. Ram Kumar's "tha"s were softer, his vowels lilted musically—a telltale sign of the Damodar Valley dialect spoken in

Deoghar. The Dumka folks, on the other hand, were known for their sharper "t"s and a clipped, almost staccato rhythm.

His Bhojpuri, mixed with Khortha, though polished by years of city life, held a subtle lilt—a melody born from the dusty streets and sun-drenched plains of Deoghar. Saanvi recognized it instantly.

Piece by piece, the puzzle fell into place. Ram Kumar wasn't from Dumka; he was from Deoghar.

Suddenly, a voice cut through the fog of her mind. "Saanvi? Are you with me?"

She flinched, her eyes snapping back to the screen, then to Ram Kumar's concerned face hovering above her desk. His eyebrows, perpetually raised in curiosity, seemed to burrow deeper into his forehead.

"Oh! Yes, sir," she stammered, emerging from her internal thought process. "Sir, are you from Deoghar?"

For a moment, Mr. Ram Kumar seemed speechless, his normally expressive face unreadable. Then a slow smile spread across his features, tinged with a hint of disbelief. "Yes, I am from Deoghar," he admitted, a touch of pride softening his voice. "How did you figure that out?"

Saanvi shrugged, her eyes bright with a small victory. "Just a combination of clues, sir. The way you pronounced certain words, the rhythm of your speech, and some calculations of distance and probability... it all pointed toward Deoghar, if I'm not mistaken."

Mr. Kumar chuckled, a warm sound that filled the room. "Not mistaken at all, young lady. You have a keen eye for detail. Welcome to the IT team, Saanvi. I have a feeling you'll do great things here."

As Saanvi settled into her cubicle chair in her new office, her fingers traced the edges of the open diary before her. Her eyes darted from her blinking phone to the stacks of files on her desk, then back to the blank page of the diary before her. A faint smile played on her lips as she uncapped her pen, ready to capture the day's events — the ones that would shape policies and change lives.

This isn't just about handling paperwork, phone calls, or scheduling meetings, Saanvi thought. *I'm here to make a difference, to be the voice and the hands that turn ideas into actions.* Each task, each note she jotted down, was a step toward something greater—something that truly mattered.

She observed her teammate Ankita's desk, a colorful mess that reflected her creative spirit. A miniature Durga idol sat tucked between the sticky notes.

Her accent was a melody in itself, with a rhythmic Bengali rhythym flowing through her words, as naturally as the Hooghly river coursed through her veins. "*Oh, bhalo achho*?" (Are you well?) she'd greet anyone with a smile. And if anyone seemed down, a quick, "*Shona, ki hoyeche*?" (My dear, what's wrong?) would instantly melt away their worries.

Her phone calls were a rapid-fire of Bengali, punctuated by dramatic sighs and theatrical exclamations. Colleagues would catch snippets like, "*Ami ki bolchi, eta ei bhabe hobe na!*" (What I'm saying won't work like this!), prompting knowing smiles and quick translations about aunties, in-laws, and the latest family drama.

Saanvi's first day in the administrative office was one of quiet chaos. Lights reflected off rows of pristine desktops, each serving as a gateway to a world of spreadsheets, reports and emails. The air was filled with a low, constant hum—the sound of printers, the rustle of papers, and hushed phone conversations forming the backdrop of daily routines.

Mrs. Gupta, an elderly manager with a neat bun and fingers that moved swiftly across the keyboard, processed loan documents with remarkable efficiency. In contrast, the young officer Gaurav lounged in his swivel chair after finishing his tasks, his attention fixed on his phone, boredom stark on his face against the backdrop of the office's busy urgency.

Two female staff members leaned in close, whispering conspiratorially over a coffee mug, their giggles resonating softly, like the sound of tuning forks.

The office was a living entity—the scent of chai mingled with a simmering tension, punctuated by the occasional flare-up of frustration—a dropped stapler, a misplaced document, a printer that chose its own lunch break. But beneath the tension, a rhythm pulsed. It was the rhythm of deadlines met, problems solved, and bureaucratic gears grinding, ever so slowly, toward some unseen goal.

During lunch break, Saanvi and Ankita sat together in the office, sharing a tiffin box filled with Bengali cuisine. As they ate, Ankita launched into a recitation of a Rabindranath Tagore poem, her voice rising and falling with the rhythm of the words.

Saanvi listened, mesmerized. Though she wasn't Bengali, she found herself drawn into the world Tagore painted—a world of lush landscapes, delicate emotions, and profound truths. Memories of her days in Bolpur, where she learned about Tagore, flooded back.

"Ankita, that was beautiful," she said. "Your recitation brought Tagore's words to life."

Ankita shrugged, a hint of pride in her eyes. "Tagore's words are not just stories, Saanvi. They're mirrors to the soul, reflecting our joys, our sorrows, our hopes. And sometimes, they're windows, opening up to new worlds, new perspectives. Whenever you get time, start with *Gitanjali*."

The day progressed like a slow-burn mystery, with Saanvi playing the role of detective, deciphering hidden meanings in paperclips, exchanged glances**,** and sighs over a lost file. By the time seven o'clock arrived, she didn't have all the answers, but she had gained something more valuable: an understanding, a sense of belonging.

Exiting the office, the weight of her new responsibilities settled on her shoulders, yet her mind raced with the day's revelations.

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With some effort and the help of a few kindred spirits, Saanvi found a lovely apartment near her workplace in Varanasi. This new residence surpassed her previous home's charm, where she had lived during her posting at the Bolpur Branch.

The apartment building welcomed Saanvi as if it were a home meant for years to come. Moonlight painted her solo apartment. Though it felt far from home, she learned to listen to the voice of her own heart.

The stars became her neighbors, and the moon—a silent confidante—watched over her dreams through the open windows.

As she carefully arranged her belongings in her new abode, she looked forward to the fresh environment, new neighbors, and potential friendships. It felt like an opportunity for significant personal growth and self-discovery, signaling the start of a brighter chapter in her life.

Initially, she felt like a solo swan navigating the urban pond of life. Her apartment became her personal concert hall, where silence was the only audience. The chirping of birds outside provided a miniature concert, and she learned to appreciate the rhythmic patter of rain on the windowpane and the occasional shriek of frustration at a stubborn jar lid.

Breakfast was a one-person opera—cereal clinking against a mug, the only vocalization needed. Dinner became a jazz improvisation, with leftovers transformed into culinary masterpieces.

Her kitchen, once a stage for midnight Maggi experiments, became a dance floor for bubbling rice and sizzling spices as she tried to recreate her mother's legendary recipes.

Forget about rigid routines—laundry had become a common form of procrastination, and the dishes piled up in the kitchen.

Surveying her cluttered apartment, with a mountain of laundry looming, Saanvi felt overwhelmed. She reminded herself: *Don't underestimate the power of small steps. In geometry, even the shortest line*

segment connects two points, and in life, even the smallest action can spark a significant change.

So, she started small—folding a suit, putting away a book, washing one dish at a time. Each action, like a tiny line segment, connected the chaos to the possibility of future order.

The mountain didn't vanish entirely, but with each step, it felt more manageable. By the end, not only was the apartment clean, but Saanvi also felt a sense of accomplishment—a reminder that even the longest journey begins with a single step, a single line drawn in the sand of procrastination.

The power of compound interest applies not only to finances but also to personal transformation; small efforts truly add up over time.

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A frustrated groan from the next cubicle caught her attention. "Is the printer acting up again?" Saanvi called out.

"It's eating every document I send!" came the exasperated reply.

Saanvi chuckled, walking over. "Let me take a look."

Saanvi's day in the office began with the usual sounds: the screech of a paper jam, a duet between the blinking 'toner low' light and the 'empty tray' display, setting the stage for yet another round of cartridge or paper replacement.

The office printer was a deity that demanded sacrifices, worshipped with offerings of toner cartridges, cursed with muttered prayers, and appeased by frantic tech support personnel.

Within minutes, she had the machine humming smoothly. "There you go. Just needed a little encouragement."

Back at her desk, Saanvi tackled her overflowing inbox. She quickly prioritized urgent requests, delegated tasks to her team, and crafted diplomatic responses to tricky interdepartmental issues.

The relentless work continued—papers stacked high, eyes tired, and tension thick in the air. Mr. Ram Kumar, usually composed, paced like a caged tiger, his frustration evident.

Sensing the tension, Saanvi took a deep breath. She leaned back in her chair, stretched, and theatrically yawned. "Anyone else feel like we could all use a caffeine break? I'm thinking coffee breaks every hour should be mandatory. Who's with me?" she joked, her voice laced with humor.

Gaurav quipped, "Saanvi, is coffee the secret behind your boundless energy?"

Saanvi replied with a smile, "Absolutely. I run on laughter and coffee. My blood type is coffee negative. Please donate generously. It's not an addiction; it's an understanding."

A few hesitant smiles appeared, then a wave of laughter. Even Mr. Ram Kumar cracked a grin.

A notification popped up—her third meeting of the day was starting in five minutes. She quickly saved her work, grabbed her diary and pen, and strode purposefully toward the conference room.

"Saanvi, thank goodness you're here," her Ankita said as she slipped into a seat. "The seniors were asking about the progress data from last week."

She nodded, handing over the relevant reports to her. As the senior's face appeared on the large screen, Saanvi straightened her posture and smiled confidently.

"...And as you can see from these figures," Saanvi explained, her voice clear and assured as she walked the seniors through complex data visualizations. Her colleagues gave her a subtle thumbs-up from across the table.

After the meeting, she returned to her desk. Her phone buzzed with a message from HR. "Don't forget—you have to submit your reimbursement claims in the HRMS portal."

Saanvi smiled. She'd been looking forward to doing that for several days but hadn't found the time.

And so the days went on. As Friday evening approached, Saanvi put the finishing touches on a comprehensive report. She hit 'send'

with a satisfying click, then leaned back in her chair, surveying her now-tidy desk with satisfaction.

"Hey, Saanvi," called out Richa from the Advances department. "We're visiting a café to celebrate a colleague's birthday. Coming?"

Saanvi checked her watch and smiled. "Wouldn't miss it," she said, reaching for her bag.

***

Saanvi was a radiant walking confetti bomb of sunshine, her smile bursting with the energy of a thousand birthday candles. She possessed a magical calendar carved into her heart—a memory built from sunbeams, with an uncanny accuracy for remembering birthdays and anniversaries, making everyone feel like the star of their own personal calendar.

Snacks were her love language. Her desk drawer and bag were portals to a land of unexpected delights—KitKats, candies, cookies. Whether for a colleague's promotion, during a brainstorming session, or simply while chit-chatting, she understood the language of shared snacks. Their aroma dissolved tension and bridged gaps between souls.

One day, Gaurav saw her treasure trove of KitKats and cookies. "Sharing is caring, Saanvi!" he snickered.

Saanvi winked and replied, "But only with those who appreciate the art of surprise snacks!"

Her compliments were like wind chimes, tinkling with unexpected beauty. "I love how your glasses catch the sunlight like liquid emeralds!" or, "Your laugh always reminds me of the sound of raindrops on tin roofs!" she'd declare, making even the most ordinary seem extraordinary. With Saanvi, every encounter was a surprise party, every corner a hidden treasure, and every person a story waiting to be discovered.

Nicknames were the soundtrack to Saanvi's life, a symbol of warmth, laughter, and love. They were a reminder that even the most

ordinary moments could be sprinkled with a little bit of magic just by calling someone something special.

They were like secret codes for Saanvi and her loved ones. She gave the nickname "Mishti" to Ankita because of her sweet way of speaking in Bengali. Gaurav, the young Excel wizard from Business Strategy and Recources Department of the office, became Saanvi's second friend after Ankita. She gave him the nickname "DataMan" because he was famous for mining any data within minutes using his Excel skills and intelligence.

No one was exempt from her playful linguistic inventions, not even her senior-most boss, the Head of the Administrative Office, Mr. Radha Krishnan Reddy. Saanvi nicknamed him "SRK," short for "Sir Radha Krishnan." It was a clever twist, distinguishing him from the more widely known initials of the Bollywood superstar, Shah Rukh Khan.

At first, it was just a lighthearted gesture, but over time, the nickname gained popularity within the office. Colleagues would often hear Saanvi referring to her boss as SRK in conversations, and soon enough, it became second nature for everyone to follow suit.

Each nickname carried with it a unique sentiment—a special bond shared between her and the person she nicknamed. Each nickname held a story, a connection, a piece of her heart.

In the world of banking, Saanvi also observed a covert clan she nicknamed "the sleeper cell agents." They lurked in cubicles all day, hidden behind lukewarm chai, chit-chatting, browsing social media, and watching reels on their phones. These elusive creatures magically activated as soon as the clock struck five, like nocturnal ninjas emerging from the shadows. With their secret mission to impress management, they embarked on a late-night adventure of exaggerated productivity, typing away furiously and pretending to be hardworking heroes of the office—though not actually accomplishing much.

It was a comedy of errors disguised as dedication. These activated sleeper cell agents morphed into productivity ninjas, battling spreadsheets until the sub-staff begged them to go home.

***

After leaving the office, she reached her apartment, utterly exhausted. Another day had passed, filled with unfamiliar streets and the constant feeling of being a puzzle piece forced into the wrong box.

As she entered her apartment, she moved towards the kitchen to prepare dinner. The faint clatter of pots and pans echoed in the kitchen. She moved methodically, chopping salad, the rhythmic swoosh of the knife on the cutting board blending with the soft hiss of oil in the pan. The aroma of simmering spices soon filled the air, enveloping the room in warmth as she prepared her meal.

When she closed her eyes, memories flooded in. She missed the comforting love of her mother's cooking, the hearty laughter of her father, and the warmth of her brother's embrace. She longed for shared meals, lazy Sundays, the familiar stillness of her childhood bedroom, and the spontaneous moments of connection that once filled her days.

Exhaustion clung to Saanvi like a second skin after the relentless grind at the office.

"Dear bed, you are my true love," Saanvi whispered as she collapsed onto it.

She slumped onto the bed, her dinner cooling and forgotten on the table. The familiar ritual of escape—a dive into Hotstar's endless stream of content—fizzled into an anticlimactic struggle. The screen, once a portal to fantastical worlds, had become a mocking mirror reflecting her loneliness.

The enticing aroma of dinner was a bitter reminder of a meal meant to be shared, not devoured in the silence of her apartment.

Finally, a ray of hope appeared on the screen—a web series offering a temporary escape. But even with the flickering screen before her, a gnawing ache took root in her chest. Binge-watching could numb the edges of loneliness, but it could never truly erase the phantom ache of family, the painful sting of distance etched into every pixel.

The screen's glow painted harsh lines on her face, accentuating the stark absence of warmth, the silence a deafening reminder of the connection she craved. Even as the show droned on, Saanvi's heart pined for the quiet hum of conversation, the comfort of shared plates, and the unspoken language of home that no algorithm could ever replicate.

Suddenly, a sharp memory pierced the haze of exhaustion. It was her childhood kitchen, bathed in the golden glow of the electric bulb, her mother's laughter mingling with the sizzle of spices. The wooden table, where spilled rice and conversations intertwined, held the warmth of countless shared meals.

The loneliness, a cold serpent coiled around her heart, tightened its grip. With a shaky hand, Saanvi made a video call to her mother. A single tap, and Saanvi's phone screen came to life, her mother's face radiating love. The familiar backdrop of their kitchen came into view, warm and inviting even through the digital interface.

The sight of her, even through the pixelated screen, brought a wave of relief—a lifeline thrown across the gap of distance.

"Maa," Saanvi whispered, her voice thick with unshed tears. Tears may have no weight, but they carry heavy emotions.

"Saanvi Beta! Oh, it's so good to see you," her mother replied, her eyes shining with joy. "Have you eaten? You look thin."

Saanvi laughed, a mix of amusement and longing. "I am having dinner, Maa. Don't worry."

"What did you make? Not that instant noodle stuff again, I hope."

"Actually," Saanvi said, sitting up straighter, "I tried making your Kadhi Pakoda recipe."

Her mother's eyebrows shot up. "Really? How did it turn out?"

"It was... edible," Saanvi admitted with a sheepish grin. "But not like yours. I think I'm missing your secret ingredient."

"The secret ingredient is a mother's love, beta," her mother said softly, "and a pinch of heeng."

They both laughed, the sound bridging the miles between them.

"How's Papa?" Saanvi asked, her eyes searching the background.

"Oh, you know him. Busy watching the news."

Saanvi's eyes misted slightly. "I miss him and you a lot, Maa."

Her mother's expression softened. "We miss you too, beta. The house is too quiet without you."

Saanvi swallowed hard. "Maa, I—"

"No, no," her mother interrupted, waving her hand. "Don't get emotional. Tell me about work. Anything interesting?"

Saanvi took a deep breath, grateful for the change of subject. "Actually, yes. I'm leading a new initiative..."

As Saanvi talked, her mother listened intently, nodding and smiling with pride. The conversation flowed, touching on neighborhood gossip, family updates, and Saanvi's life in the new city.

As their call neared its end, Saanvi's mother said, "Beta, remember to call your brother. It's his birthday next week."

"I will, Maa. I promise."

There was a moment of silence, both reluctant to say goodbye.

"Saanvi," her mother said suddenly, "I'm keeping some besan laddoos for you. For when you visit next."

Saanvi felt a lump in her throat. "I can't wait, Maa. I love you."

"I love you too, beta. Take care."

The miles that separated them dissolved in the warmth of their connection. When they finally said goodbye, Saanvi felt lighter than she had in days. The memory of their conversation, a tiny flame in the darkness, chased away the shadows of loneliness.

***

In the chronicles of Saanvi's professional journey, a wave of joy washed over her when her staff vehicle loan was approved. As a distinguished officer at her workplace, she set the wheels of her aspirations in motion with the dream of acquiring a Maruti Suzuki Brezza.

Saanvi's fingers trembled with excitement when she signed the final paperwork at the showroom, the pen's ink marking her new beginning.

As she prepared to take her car, a smile spread across her face—one of pride and disbelief. The keys jangled melodically in her hand as she unlocked the door, and the new car smell enveloped her like a promise. Settling into the driver's seat—her seat now—she adjusted the rearview mirror, catching her own eyes, bright with the thrill of independence. With a turn of the key, the engine purred to life, and Saanvi's heart raced with the possibilities that awaited on the open road.

Saanvi affectionately nicknamed her car "Titli."

Titli wasn't merely metal and chrome; it mirrored Saanvi's spirit—a butterfly with a heartbeat. It was more than just a car—it was a love story written in the language of winds and wings.

The next day, Saanvi's sleek grey hatchback—Titli—glided into the office parking lot, a jewel amidst the sea of monochrome sedans and dusty SUVs. As she cruised into the lot, her new car gracing the pavement like a fallen star, her colleagues gathered outside to admire it.

"Oh my God, Saanvi! It's stunning!" Gaurav exclaimed, his eyes wide with admiration. His fingers traced the sleek lines on the hood, his own aspirations reflected in the gleaming paint. The car stood as a symbol of success—tangible proof that dreams could indeed take shape on four wheels.

Ankita clapped her hands with a squeal. "Saanvi, that's fantastic! You deserve it after all the hard work." Her smile was bright and unadulterated, a beacon of joy.

Basking in the attention, Saanvi soaked in the varied reactions like a queen surveying her court. "I named her Titli," she explained.

"Titli?" Ankita scoffed, raising her eyebrows. "Seriously, Saanvi? A butterfly for this... this speed demon?"

Saanvi chuckled. "My dear Mishti, Titli isn't about speed; it's about freedom."

Her voice tinged with nostalgia, she continued, "With Titli, I get to relive that feeling. Every open road, every twist and turn, I'm not just driving; I'm flying. The wind flows through my hair, the engine sings a song of freedom, and for a few moments, I'm the fearless girl again."

She paused, her eyes shining. "Titli is my freedom, my adventure, my proof that even the smallest wings can take you to the most incredible places."

"A butterfly, huh?" Ankita mused, a smile tugging at her lips. "I guess you're right, Saanvi. Maybe speed isn't everything. Maybe freedom comes in all shapes and sizes, even with four wheels and a fluttering name."

Saanvi nodded, a sweet smile playing on her lips. "Yes, Mishti. And every time I get behind the wheel, I'm reminded that I can fly. That I can chase my dreams, no matter how big or small, because Titli, my little butterfly, will always carry me."

Titli became Saanvi's daily companion on her journey to the office and back to her apartment. Every morning, the engine hummed to life, the familiar thrum a comfort in the pre-dawn chill.

Street vendors, eyes squinting against the rising sun, set up their makeshift stalls, the rhythmic clanging of steel plates announcing the day's culinary delights. Scruffy dogs, tails wagging, served as ambassadors of the stray kingdom, weaving between vehicles, their barks a counterpoint to the honking horns.

As the city woke, the traffic swelled like a restless beast. Honking horns became an impatient noise, insistent and relentless. Sometimes even the kind and patient Saanvi would murmur to the person behind her car, "Honking harder won't make the cows fly, uncle!

Maybe we should try offering them some roti or bread. They might be more receptive than the drivers."

Pedestrians were the kings and queens of the road. They had the right to jaywalk, stroll leisurely across intersections, and weave through traffic like seasoned players. Saanvi had learned to yield, anticipate the unexpected, and develop a sixth sense for pedestrian movement.

E-rickshaws, passing through the chaos like metallic bees, squeezed into impossible gaps, their drivers' calls echoing as a guttural counterpoint to the cacophony. Scooty-wallahs, defying gravity on two wheels, zipped past in a blur of helmets, their audacity both infuriating and exhilarating.

On her journey back to the apartment, Saanvi saw the city through a different lens. Tired smiles were exchanged between weary workers on crowded buses. Old couples, hand in hand, their shadows stretched across the pavement, whispered tales of a love that had weathered time's storms.

***

Saanvi typed on her keyboard, sitting in the office with her monotonous routine. Outside, the world was oblivious to her spreadsheets and looming deadlines. A sudden gust of wind rattled the window, heralding an impending storm.

Moments later, the heavens opened. Rain, fierce and insistent, hammered on the glass, blurring the concrete landscape into a watercolour wash. A flicker of primal joy stirred within Saanvi, a memory awakened by the rhythmic drumming on the pane.

The rain outside mirrored the storm within her. Each drop—a crystalline tear tracing its path down the windowpane—echoed the ache in her heart.

"*Cubicles may confine our bodies, but dreams take flight on invisible wings*," she thought.

She shut her eyes, and the office vanished. In its place was sun-baked clay, thirsty and cracked. The first fat drops splattered onto the earth, hissing as they hit the ground and sending up fragrant wisps of petrichor. The heady, earthy scent—a perfume of renewal—flooded her senses. It was a flashback to her childhood, a memory tinged with sunshine and laughter.

Suddenly, she was seven years old again, barefoot and giggling, chasing raindrops down dusty village lanes. The rain, a playful friend, soaked her hair and clothes, transforming her into a water sprite. Laughter, pure and unrestrained, tumbled from her lips as she chased after her brother, Vijay, their joyous shrieks carried away by the wind. Her nani (maternal grandmother), with eyes sparkling with shared mischief, would pull them inside, wrap them in a towel, and tell them stories of dancing clouds and laughing skies.

The memory warmed Saanvi from within. She longed for that uninhibited joy—for the freedom to dance in the rain, to fold and sail paper boats, to feel the earth thrumming with the rhythm of the storm.

A sigh escaped her lips, a wisp of longing blown away by the wind that now whistled through the vents. She could almost feel the cool spray on her skin, the mud squishing between her toes, the laughter bubbling up from her soul.

But the Excel sheets and emails remained, a grim reminder of the present: responsibilities, deadlines, the relentless march of adulthood. A pang of sadness settled in her chest.

The memory faded, leaving behind an ache—a longing for the thrill of childhood innocence, now softened and blurred by the passing years.

The rain washing over the city was also cleansing a layer of dust from her soul, reminding her of the simple joys hidden beneath the daily grind.

***

Saanvi stood at the window, the city lights twinkling like scattered diamonds below. The view was breathtaking, a reminder of her success, yet a hollow ache resonated within her. It was a constant battle—a tug-of-war between ambition and responsibility, between her own aspirations and the needs of those she loved.

On one hand, she reveled in the challenges and rewards of her career. Her innovative ideas were recognized, her leadership skills blossomed, and her accomplishments were lauded. But her demanding job left her with little time for family and friends. The missed family dinners, the canceled outings with friends, the postponed phone calls—all piled up, creating a heavy burden on her conscience.

She loved her family fiercely—her parents, who had sacrificed so much for her, and her brother, with whom she had shared countless childhood memories. *They've sacrificed so much for me*, she thought. *And here I am, miles away, chasing a career while they grow older without me.*

The distance she had created to focus on her career felt like a betrayal, a constant reminder of the sacrifices she was making. "What am I doing?" she whispered to herself. "I'm chasing success, but at what cost?"

She tossed and turned, her mind racing. "*No, no, no... it's not like that. I'm doing this for them, for us. We'll have a better life, a brighter future.*" But the doubts crept in, like thieves in the night. "*Really? Or am I just running away? Leaving them behind?*"

Saanvi's eyes stung, her vision blurring. *Stop it. I am not a bad person. I am just... focused.* The moon cast a white glow on her ceiling, illuminating the dark corners of her mind. But what about all the missed moments? The laughter, the tears, the memories?

Her thoughts swirled, a jumble of emotions. *I'll make it up to them, I promise. I'll be there for them, eventually.*

Saanvi was full of kindness and strength, always the one to lend a helping hand or solve a problem when it arose. But like anyone else, she wasn't perfect. Beneath all her good intentions and successes,

there were cracks—small flaws that she wrestled with quietly. One of these flaws was '*overthinking*'.

She often found herself overthinking the simplest of things, running through endless "*what ifs*" in her mind. Yes, she overthought, but not because she wanted to be sad. She just felt too much; she valued things, emotions, people, and promises.

But even with those little flaws, she was still amazing. She was living proof that even if our soul is torn in half, we can still navigate through life beautifully. She was the Ace of Hearts, and magic flowed from her soul.

***

Today was the 11th of August. In the evening, the office transformed into a party space because it was Saanvi's birthday. Everyone gathered around her, singing a heartfelt rendition of the "Happy Birthday" song. Despite varying levels of enthusiasm, they butchered the tune, unintentionally turning it into a comedy.

As the final notes faded, Saanvi blew out the candles on her cake, a silent wish fluttering on her lips. It wasn't a wish for riches or fame but for more days like this—days filled with the warmth of friendship and the joy of being surrounded by people who loved her, quirks and all.

Suddenly, the door creaked open, and in walked Mr. Reddy. "Happy birthday, Saanvi!" he boomed, his voice unusually warm. "I... uh... heard it was a special occasion and wanted to offer my personal wishes."

Saanvi was speechless, managing only a stammered, "Thank you, sir!"

"Well, I hope you continue to grow and progress in life," Mr. Reddy said with quiet encouragement as he straightened his tie.

"Happy birthday, Saanvi! You're the sunshine of this office," beamed Ankita. "And guess what? Everyone pooled in for your ultimate SRK movie marathon!"

A collective gasp rippled through the room. Mr. Reddy, known for his stoicism and love for his intelligent strategies, choked on his chai. "SRK?" he spluttered, his eyes wide like an Excel sheet filled with rogue formulas.

Stifled giggles erupted. Ankita, unable to contain her mischief, blurted out, "Oh, haven't you heard, sir? You're officially SRK. Saanvi's been calling you that ever since she joined this office."

Mr. Reddy's face turned from crimson to a faint blush detectable only by Gaurav's laser-sharp vision. He cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure. "SRK? You mean Shah Rukh Khan..." he mused, tapping his chin. "Not bad, I suppose. Though I'm more of a Chiranjeevi or Amitabh Bachhan kind of guy. Classic, you know?"

Saanvi's eyes widened in disbelief, her voice laced with surprise. "Really?"

"Absolutely!" Mr. Reddy declared, puffing out his chest. "The brooding hero, the tragic lover... that's me!"

"Oh, but you *are* SRK," chimed in Gaurav, the resident tech wizard. "Remember that time you quoted Shah Rukh Khan to motivate us during the server crash? You said, '*Aise bade bade shehron mein aisi choti choti baatein hoti rehti hain, abhi connectivity aa jayegi*!' (In big cities like this, small things like this happen. Don't worry, connectivity will come back!) And it worked!"

Mr. Reddy's cheeks burned brighter than the birthday candles. He fumbled for his glasses, muttering, "I... I might have seen a few Bollywood movies. For research purposes, of course."

Saanvi, unable to hold back her laughter, approached him with a playful glint in her eye. "SRK actually stands for 'Sir Radha Krishnan'. I call you SRK out of both respect and affection. Here's your royal decree—a lifetime pass to all my Bollywood movie nights."

Mr. Reddy, overwhelmed by the onslaught of laughter and affection, surrendered with a smile. "Alright, alright, Saanvi. You win. I may not be the king of Bollywood, but I'll gladly be your SRK. And who knows, maybe I'll even learn that iconic signature move like SRK," he said, spreading his hands in slow motion.

The office erupted in cheers as Mr. Reddy, the once-feared boss, attempted SRK's dance move.

***

One day, as Gaurav hastily packed up his belongings, a sly grin stretched across his face. Noticing his suspicious behavior, Saanvi and Ankita exchanged knowing glances, their curiosity piqued.

"Hey, DataMan, what's the rush? Planning to take a day off to binge-watch Netflix?" Saanvi teased.

Ankita, who sat right across from him, immediately perked up. She loved office gossip. Leaning forward, her interest grew. "Yeah, spill the beans, Gaurav. What's the big secret?"

Gaurav paused, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. "Well, you see, I have a family emergency," he began, his tone somber.

Saanvi's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "A family emergency? Is everything okay, Gaurav?" she asked, concerned.

Gaurav nodded solemnly. "Yes, unfortunately, my distant relative passed away suddenly. I need to attend the funeral," he replied, his expression serious.

Ankita's eyes widened in shock, but before she could respond, Saanvi burst into uncontrollable laughter. "Gaurav, are you serious? You expect us to believe that old 'family emergency' excuse?" she exclaimed between fits of giggles.

Gaurav's facade crumbled, and he couldn't help but chuckle at his failed attempt at deception. "Okay, okay, you caught me," he admitted sheepishly. "*Logon ko lagta hai bank ki job mein bahut maze hain, unhe kya pata ki bank ko rishtedaar ki death bata kar unhi ki shaadi*

mein jaa raha hoon..." (People think a bank job is all fun, but they don't know I'm attending my relative's wedding after telling the bank my relative passed away.) "But Saanvi, don't tell anyone, please!"

A brief silence hung in the air. Then, Saanvi and Ankita both burst out laughing uncontrollably. Gaurav just shook his head, trying not to grin too widely.

"Don't worry, your secret is safe with us—just like the money is safe in Swiss banks!" Saanvi gasped between giggles. "We know how hard it is to get leave approved!"

Ankita nodded vigorously, still laughing. "Just bring us some shaadi ka laddoo when you're back!" she said with a grin. "Oh, Gaurav, you never fail to entertain us with your creative excuses," she added, amused.

Saanvi nodded in agreement, wiping away tears of laughter. "Seriously, Gaurav, you should consider a career in stand-up comedy," she quipped.

As Gaurav made his way out of the office, Saanvi and Ankita exchanged amused glances, silently promising to keep his secret safe. After all, they knew all too well the struggle of trying to wrangle a day off from their demanding banking jobs.

***

After waking up in the morning, Saanvi's eyes lit up with happiness upon seeing the SMS notification on her phone—it was the message that her salary had been credited to her account. The "Salary Credited" SMS always made her happy. She got up and quickly got ready for the office.

Upon reaching the office, she saw Ankita already there, working on her computer. Saanvi wished her a good morning and said, "Honestly, Mishti, is there any greater source of joy than seeing that 'Salary Credited' message on your phone at the end of the month?"

Ankita replied with a mischievous look, "I understand your happiness, Saanvi. I was waiting for it too."

Saanvi smiled and said, "You know, every working professional eagerly waits for only two things: their salary and the weekend."

Ankita agreed with a laugh, "It's like we're on a perpetual countdown, waiting for that precious salary to hit our bank accounts and for the clock to strike evening on the day before the weekend. But both salary and weekends disappear at the speed of light."

Saanvi added, "Seriously! If someone invented a way to fast-forward to payday or weekends, they'd be millionaires overnight—and we'd be taking trips every now and then."

Ankita sighed, clutching her cup of chai like a lifeline. "Can you believe it, Saanvi? It feels like our salary vanishes faster than a magician's rabbit!"

Saanvi nodded fervently, her eyes scanning her credit card bills with dread. "It's like the money hits our account on payday, does a quick little dance, and then vanishes into thin air within a few days. Honestly, I've reached a point where I'm no longer afraid of fraud calls or sharing OTPs..."

"But seriously," Ankita groaned, "where does it all go? One minute we're celebrating payday with a fancy dinner, and the next, we're scrounging for change to buy groceries!"

Saanvi agreed, her expression a mix of resignation and amusement. "It's a mystery, Mishti. Between credit card bills, investments, rent, random online shopping, petrol, and those unavoidable miscellaneous expenses, our money seems to have a mind of its own."

She continued, "When we start making money and paying bills, we realize that our parents sacrificed a lot for us. When we do the math, we find out they were performing miracles because it's hard to understand how they managed to give us the best with so little."

Ankita nodded in agreement, understanding that despite their best efforts at budgeting and saving, their salary had a tendency to slip through their fingers like sand.

As they continued to ponder their finances, Ankita couldn't help but offer a silver lining amidst the chaos. "Well, at least we're in this together, Saanvi. They say misery loves company, right?"

Saanvi grinned, raising her chai cup in a mock toast. "Cheers to that, Ankita. Here's to surviving another month of financial acrobatics. And you know what?" she declared, pulling out two KitKat bars. "Desperate times call for desperate measures. We may be financially challenged, but hunger won't win today."

Ankita grinned, accepting the offering. "To surviving the post-payday blues!" they both said in unison, taking a bite of their KitKats.

***

Saanvi pushed open the heavy door of the conference room, taking in the familiar sight before her. Mr. Reddy sat at the head of the table, his neatly pressed suit a stark contrast to the rumpled attire of the rest of the team.

Her eyes, trained by silent observation, swept across the room. Gaurav, the "DataMan," was tapping a frantic rhythm on his phone, his brow furrowed in concentration. Anjali, the ever-optimistic manager, doodled in her diary. Even Mr. Sen, usually the picture of composure, had a faint tremor in his hand as he adjusted his glasses.

Saanvi settled into her chair, her analytical mind instantly searching for clues.

As Mr. Sen began his presentation about how the September quarter was ending and how they were lagging behind their targets across different parameters, the room fell quiet. Saanvi observed her colleagues, noting their subtle reactions. Gaurav's tapping quickened, contrasting with Mr. Gupta's monotone delivery. Anjali's doodles became more erratic, her pen a nervous metronome.

Saanvi wasn't just listening; she was decoding the room's mood. Papers rustled as hands eagerly took notes, capturing Mr. Reddy's insights. Today's meeting was focused on customer service—not the textbook approach, but an empathy-driven connection.

"Remember," Mr. Reddy's soothing voice filled the room, "every customer who walks through our doors is not just a transaction; they're a story. A story of hopes, dreams, and sometimes struggles. Our job isn't just to crunch numbers but to listen to those stories, understand their needs, and guide them with the expertise we possess."

He paused, his gaze sweeping across the attentive faces. Saanvi, her notebook filled with Mr. Reddy's words of wisdom, felt a spark ignite within her.

"Anyone from our younger staff want to share some suggestions? Saanvi, would you like to add anything?" Mr. Radha Krishnan Reddy asked in a calm voice, looking directly at her.

Saanvi smiled and said, "Well, according to the Pythagorean Theorem, life isn't about finding the right angles; it's about building bridges between them."

"I didn't quite get that, Saanvi. Can you elaborate?" Mr. Reddy inquired.

"Absolutely, sir," Saanvi began, her tone thoughtful but confident. "If we think about the Pythagorean Theorem in the context of our customer relationships, it's not about perfect alignment. Instead, it's about creating meaningful connections between seemingly disparate elements—just like in life, where different experiences and perspectives intersect."

She paused briefly to let her point settle, then continued, "In banking, it's not just about numbers; it's about the dreams our customers deposit and the aspirations they withdraw. To truly connect with them, we need to understand their hopes and desires. Compassion becomes the bridge, uniting us despite our differences and allowing us to meet on common ground."

Saanvi leaned forward slightly, her voice gaining momentum. "If we want to grow our bank's business, we should start with ourselves. Each of us can bring in friends and family as customers and offer them the best service possible. That personal touch will create a ripple

effect, with satisfied customers spreading the word. Before long, we'll surpass our targets well ahead of time."

She smiled as she finished, "It's not about finding the perfect angles; it's about building bridges that lead straight to the heart."

Her brain was like a browser with hundred tabs open: overloaded, but it never crashed when she needed it most.

"Amazing thoughts, Saanvi! Are you an engineer?" Mr. Reddy asked, impressed.

"No, sir, I'm not an engineer. I have an M.Sc. in Mathematics," Saanvi replied modestly.

"You're better than most of the engineers working in banking sector, Saanvi. You know how to apply your studies to real life. I appreciate your intelligence. Your ideas are like constellations, each one a unique star, connected by the brilliance of your mind."

Saanvi smiled, and with calm confidence, added, "Math is like a time machine—it lets us glimpse both the past and the future. It's a magnifying glass that reveals patterns in data, whether it's weather forecasting, business growth, or stock market trends."

"You're a mathematical genius, Saanvi. Let's give a round of applause to the jewel of this office!" Mr. Reddy said with enthusiasm. The entire staff broke into applause, even those secretly jealous of Saanvi, hiding their feelings behind polite smiles.

***

As the festival of lights, Diwali, approached on November 12th, 2023, Saanvi made her way back to her hometown of Jhajjar, leaving behind the spiritual haven of Varanasi.

Arriving in Jhajjar, the familiar sights and sounds welcomed her like old friends. Saanvi's heart swelled with nostalgia as she wandered through the familiar streets. The chaos of the local *sabzi mandi*, the stalls of the fruit vendors boasting meticulously arranged pyramids of colorful fruits, and the melodious calls of street vendors brought back childhood

memories and a deep sense of belonging. Diwali decorations adorned every corner, heightening the festive atmosphere.

Saanvi, laden with her trolley bag and boxes of Diwali goodies, stumbled across the threshold, a wide smile splitting her face like the sparklers she clutched in her hand.

The journey back home was filled with stories, her heart brimming with lessons learned, and her soul etched with the city's tales. She returned, not the same, but a richer version of herself—forever marked by the courage of stepping out and the magic of finding herself in the unknown.

"Papa!" she called out, her voice thick with unspoken emotions after months spent apart.

From the house, Mr. Surendra emerged, his face crinkling into a thousand sunbeams at the sight of his daughter.

"Saanvi!" he boomed, scooping her into a hug. She squealed, burying her face in the familiar scent that was uniquely his. For a moment, time seemed to melt away, leaving only the pure, unadulterated joy of reunion.

As they finally pulled apart, Mr. Surendra's eyes scanned her. "Look at you!" he exclaimed, his voice rough with emotion. "So thin, barely a sparrow left!"

Saanvi rolled her eyes playfully, a familiar retort dancing on her tongue. But before she could voice it, he was ushering her inside, peppering her with questions about her work, her friends, and her life in the bustling city that seemed a million miles away from their quiet Jhajjar bungalow.

Saanvi's mother, Asha, rushed over, her happiness evident in her eyes as she cupped Saanvi's face in her hands. "Saanvi, beta, you're finally home!" she choked out, her voice thick with emotion. The worry and longing that had gnawed at her for months seemed to melt away in the warmth of Saanvi's embrace. Mother and daughter held each other close, letting the love and relief of being reunited wash over them.

"Saanvi!" Vijay shouted, racing out and throwing his arms around her in a tight hug. Saanvi laughed and squeezed him back fiercely, overjoyed to see her brother after so long.

At that moment, family love outshone even the brightest Diwali lights. Separated for months, yet never apart in heart, Saanvi found herself enveloped in the loving embrace of her parents and brother—a missing piece finally reunited with her family.

Later, the aroma of cinnamon and cloves wafted through the kitchen, filling the air with Diwali's warmth. Chinese lights glimmered outside on the neighbors' homes, casting colourful shadows, while inside, the kitchen hummed with activity. Saanvi observed her mother's skilled hands shaping dough into perfect puris.

"Why not take a break, Maa?" Saanvi's concern tinged her voice. "Everyone else gets holidays on Diwali, but you work twice as hard."

Her mother paused, a soft smile gracing her lips. "Festivals, my dear, are about making others happy, filling their bellies with laughter and their homes with love."

Saanvi watched her mother with new understanding. No longer did she harbor childish complaints or resentment. She saw the invisible threads binding their world—the silent sacrifices fueling their joy.

She noticed the weariness in her mother's eyes, the hidden strain in her back, and the calloused hands of a life dedicated to nurturing and giving. Yet, beneath it all, there radiated a quiet love.

At that moment, Saanvi understood. Her mother, like countless others, was a silent hero, an invisible architect of happiness. She approached her mother, wordlessly wrapping her in gratitude. In that embrace, Saanvi vowed to carry forward her mother's extraordinary love and sacrifice.

***

In the evening, the sweet scent of incense beckoned Saanvi to the heart of the house, where the entire family had gathered to worship Goddess Lakshmi and Lord Ganesh. Vijay's excitement about the

firecrackers bubbled over. Their mother, draped in a silken saree, her face illuminated by the soft flame of the *diya*, whispered prayers that seemed to dance on the air like invisible threads.

Beside her mother, Saanvi knelt, feeling the warmth of the *diya* seeping into her palms. The rhythmic chanting, the gentle clinking of bells, the scents of sandalwood, marigold, and camphor and the flicker of the flame—it was a divine experience.

Throughout the evening, she immersed herself in the traditions and rituals of Diwali—from lighting diyas to exchanging sweets with neighbors. Each moment overflowed with laughter and joy, grounding her in gratitude for being home with her loved ones. The diyas illuminated the entire house, welcoming Goddess Lakshmi and leaving Saanvi's heart full of serenity.

As Saanvi and her father sat together on the floor, Saanvi shared stories of her life—the late-night deadlines, the cramped apartment, the moments of loneliness. Mr. Surendra listened, concern furrowing his brow, his hand resting gently on hers.

"I missed you, Papa," Saanvi confessed, her voice barely a whisper.

"I missed you too, Saanvi beta," he replied, his hand resting gently on hers, "more than these *diyas* miss their flame."

A father's role was profoundly undervalued in this world. With silent strength, he bore the weight of innumerable sacrifices upon his shoulders, tending to the sacred hearth of home with steadfast devotion.

He shouldered burdens without complaint, worries hidden beneath a stoic facade. He worked tirelessly, not for accolades, but for the smiles that lit up his family's faces.

In the lively market streets, a father strode with purpose, pockets lined with wealth, yet heart burdened with a different currency—selflessness. With each step, he surrendered his own desires, casting them aside like petals in the wind, choosing instead to nurture the needs and dreams of his loved ones, even if it meant silencing his own desires.

At that moment, under the watchful gaze of a million stars, the distance that separated them melted away. They were father and daughter, two halves of a whole, their love a steady flame that Diwali's glow could only amplify. It was a love that transcended time and distance, a bond that would forever bind them together, brighter than any *diya*.

As Saanvi leaned her head against his shoulder, watching the fireworks explode in the black velvet sky, she knew that no matter how far life took her, this love, this bond, would remain—a guiding light on her journey, a constant reminder of where she truly belonged.

***

The piercing ring of the phone alarm cut through Saanvi's dreams on that frosty January morning. Monday—the dreaded beast—had reared its ugly head once more. Bleary-eyed, she stumbled out of bed, the world outside shrouded in a gray film of impending deadlines and overflowing inboxes from her office email.

Suddenly, the apartment walls dissolved, replaced by the warm embrace of forgotten memories. Unbidden, she was swept back in time, a child again in the heart of her childhood home in Jhajjar.

It was a lazy Sunday morning, and ten-year-old Saanvi was blissfully lost in her dreams, her mind wandering through adventures and fantasies. However, her peaceful slumber was about to be rudely interrupted by an unconventional alarm.

Saanvi stirred in her sleep, the familiar hum of the ceiling fan a comforting sound. But something felt different. The cool breeze that usually danced across her face was missing. She cracked open one eye to check, and a wave of realization hit her. The fan was still, its blades frozen mid-rotation. A fleeting moment of panic surged through her—was there a power cut? Had the apocalypse arrived while she slept? Then, a whooshing sound filled the air.

The whooshing sound came from her mother's vigorous sweeping, pushing air around the room in a determined attempt to clear away the dust bunnies. Broom in hand, her mother meticulously swept the room.

"Mommy!" Saanvi exclaimed, her voice filled with mock horror. "The fan! You've switched it off! Don't you know I was sleeping?"

Her mother, Asha, chuckled. "Oh no, Saanvi! Did the lack of flying sensation disrupt your sleep?" she teased, finishing her sweeping ritual.

On some days, there was another type of alarm. As the sun began to rise, this alarm came in the form of her mother entering the kitchen, using the mixer and grinder to prepare breakfast. The loud whirring and grinding noises reverberated through the house, serving as an unmistakable wake-up call for everyone in the vicinity.

As if on cue, Saanvi's mother called out, "Saanvi, wake up! It's time for your favorite pakoras and mint chutney!"

Saanvi groaned and buried her head under the pillow, trying in vain to drown out the noise. But her mother was relentless, and the whirring continued, accompanied by the rhythmic thumping of the mixer against the counter.

Returning to the present from her sweet childhood memories, Saanvi splashed water on her face, a smile tugging at her lips. Though she would never admit it, she secretly loved those unusual "alarms" back home in Jhajjar.

But now, since she had joined the bank, she relied on multiple alarms on her phone to get ready for work. Each alarm, spaced minutes apart like determined little soldiers, stood ready to rouse her from sleep if the previous one failed. This elaborate system ensured she wouldn't be late for the office.

The sweet ache of nostalgia receded, replaced by the familiar tug of responsibility.

***

On Saturday evening, Saanvi and Ankita were craving something to satisfy their taste buds. After much deliberation, they decided to head to their favorite golgappa wala. For them, it was a celebration of crispy shells and spicy pani.

They approached the stall, the tantalizing aroma of spicy water and tangy chutneys filling the air, making their mouths water. The *golgappa wale bhaiya* (golgappa seller) greeted them with a warm smile.

Saanvi and Ankita, their faces lit by the warm glow of the golgappa stall, surveyed their feast with satisfied smiles. A mountain of crispy-golden spheres awaited them, atop a bed of chopped onions, chickpeas, potato, a secret blend of spices, green chutney, tangy red imli chutney, the spicy water of different flavors, and a dollop of creamy white dahi (yogurt).

"Two plates, with extra chutney, Bhaiya!" Saanvi called out, her stomach already rumbling in anticipation.

The golgappa wale bhaiya, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, grinned, "*Abhi deta hoon madam!*" (I'll give it right away madam!)

Without wasting any time, Saanvi and Ankita dove into the delectable treats, savoring each bite with pure bliss. Ankita expertly popped an entire sphere into her mouth, the explosion of flavors a joyous assault on her senses. The sweet, tangy pani burst forth, mingling with the crunch of the shell, sending shivers of delight down her spine.

Saanvi, however, found herself in a peculiar predicament. As she took her first golgappa, she felt a familiar sensation on her tongue—the spicy water was already making its presence known.

Before she could even swallow, the golgappa wale bhaiya eyed her expectantly, another perfectly crafted golgappa pinched between his fingers, poised over her plate.

The bhaiya, a seasoned veteran in the art of golgappa warfare, smiled with knowing amusement. He dipped the third golgappa, holding it hostage in the pool of green, spicy water, then turned his gaze towards Saanvi.

Saanvi's eyes widened as she realized the gravity of the situation. One golgappa was already occupying her mouth, threatening to unleash its fiery deliciousness at any moment. Another one sat on her plate, beckoning her to indulge in its tangy goodness. And now, the golgappa wale bhaiya was dangling a third one in front of her, as if taunting her with the ultimate test of golgappa endurance.

Ankita, noticing Saanvi's predicament, couldn't help but burst into laughter. "Saanvi, you better hurry up!" she exclaimed between giggles. "The bhaiya is not going to wait for you forever!"

Saanvi's eyes darted between the golgappa in her mouth, the one on her plate, and the one in bhaiya's hand. Her mind raced with calculations. Swallow the one in her mouth? Snatch the one on her plate? Or risk losing the third golgappa in bhaiya's hand? A true dilemma!

In a moment of desperation, Saanvi did the only thing she could think of—she swallowed the golgappa in her mouth, letting out a satisfying "aahh" as the spicy water hit her taste buds with full force. Without missing a beat, she popped the one from her plate into her mouth and eagerly accepted the third one from the golgappa wala, now placed on her emptied plate, with the bhaiya grinning from ear to ear, clearly impressed by her dedication.

Ankita couldn't contain her laughter as she watched Saanvi's valiant efforts to enjoy the golgappa. "You're a true warrior, Saanvi!" she exclaimed, wiping away tears of mirth from her eyes.

***

The ringtone of Saanvi's phone pierced the fragile morning silence. Squinting at the screen, she saw it was her mother.

"Maa?" Saanvi croaked, her voice thick with sleep.

"Saanvi, beta," her mother's voice chirped through the receiver, "How are you doing? Did you eat breakfast? Did you sleep well?"

Saanvi mumbled half-awake answers, her brain still wrestling with the concept of consciousness.

"That's good, that's good," her mother continued, seemingly oblivious to Saanvi's sleep-deprived state. "Oh, and by the way, I called Panditji yesterday..."

Saanvi groaned internally. Panditji, the ever-present family astrologer, was both a source of amusement and exasperation.

"And Panditji said something very interesting," her mother continued, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "He said, '*Saanvi ki Kundli mein bahut Dhan hai...*'" (Saanvi's horoscope has a lot of wealth)

Saanvi choked on a non-existent sip of coffee. "*Dhan?* Maa, are you sure he didn't say, '*Saanvi ki Kundli mein bahut Kam hai...*'" (Saanvi's horoscope has a lot of lack) "because my credit card bill would definitely agree with that."

Her mother giggled. "Don't be silly, beta. Panditji said there's a lot of wealth in your future. You just need to find the right way to unlock it."

Saanvi couldn't help but smile. "Maybe you should ask him next time, 'Panditji, how exactly do I transfer this Kundli wealth to my bank account? Because, you know, rent is due, along with my credit card bills.'"

A hearty laugh rang through the phone. "Saanvi, you never take anything seriously! Now, listen to me, you're at that perfect marriage age..."

Saanvi groaned again. The dreaded 'M' word. "Maa, please, not this again. Can't my Kundli wealth just magically appear in my bank account without marriage?"

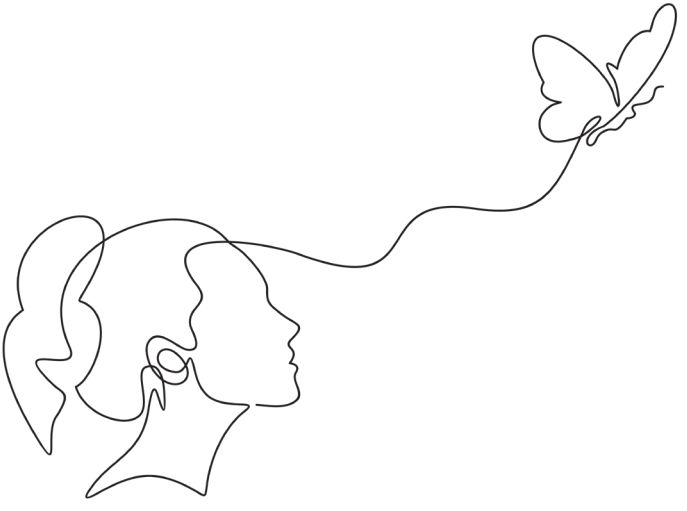
"Beta," her mother sighed dramatically, "Life doesn't work that way. And did you hear about your cousin's engagement?"

Saanvi sighed. "I'm still figuring out how to cook without setting the kitchen on fire. Let's not rush into things. But I promise, one day, I'm going to make onions cry. That's the day I might be ready for marriage... Maa, listen, there's a pigeon outside doing yoga on my window ledge. Can we talk about that instead?"

Another peal of laughter echoed through the phone. "You're impossible, Saanvi. But that's why I love you. Now go have your breakfast."

Saanvi hung up, a smile playing on her lips. Her mother's matchmaking attempts were relentless, but their conversations always brought a welcome dose of chaos into her busy life.

Saanvi's life that day felt charmed, as it had been since the day she was born. Yet, she didn't realize that clouds were gathering on the horizon.



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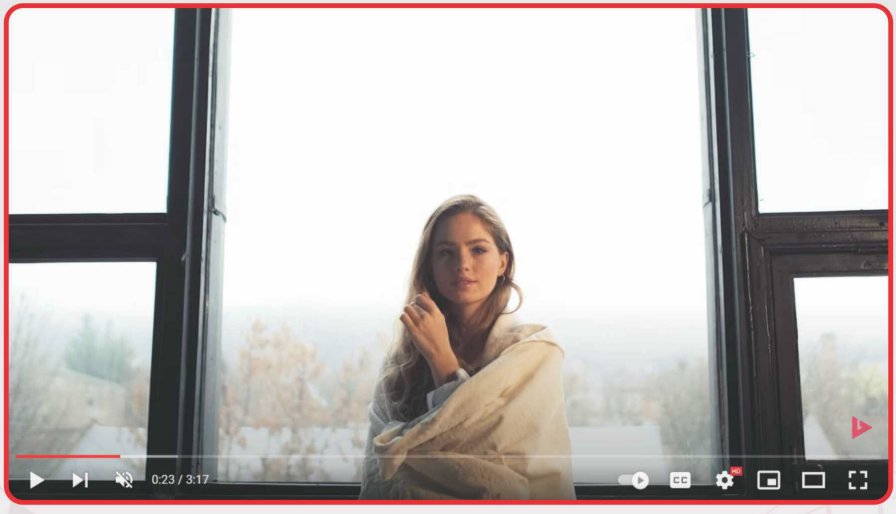
THE LEGACY OF YESTERDAY



Ace of Hearts

ZOE MARIA & BHANU SRIVASTAV

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There was a long lost love clinging to her heartstrings, wishing to be back into a life that no longer exists...

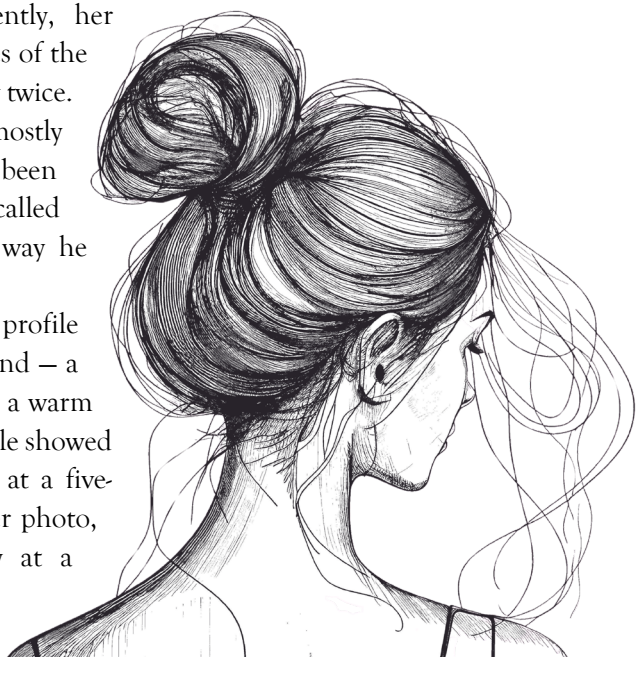
Chapter 2

Long Lost Love

As humans say, everything is written in destiny — Saanvi and Manav's marriage had been arranged by their parents a few months earlier, with the wedding set for November 2024.

Saanvi's parents beamed with pride as they spoke to their relatives about Manav. "He's from a good family, a well-settled software developer for a top MNC in Gurgaon. His parents own a house there."

Saanvi listened intently, her mind conjuring up images of the stranger she had met only twice. Their conversations, mostly over the phone, had been polite but brief. She recalled his deep voice and the way he laughed at her jokes.



Manav's WhatsApp profile picture flashed in her mind — a tall, handsome man with a warm smile. His Facebook profile showed him posing with friends at a five-star hotel, and in another photo, he was with his family at a birthday celebration.

During their last phone call, Manav had asked about her job, listening attentively as she shared stories about her colleagues. His questions seemed genuine, and Saanvi found herself opening up to him.

"He's perfect for you, beta," her mother had said, patting her hand. "A stable job, a good family. What more could you ask for?"

Saanvi nodded, unsure of what to say. She had always imagined marrying someone she loved. But Manav seemed nice, and her parents' enthusiasm was contagious.

Saanvi wholeheartedly trusted her parents' choice and agreed to the marriage. To her, her parents and brother were the greatest gifts in her life; she believed in their judgment even more than her own. How could they possibly choose someone unsuitable for her?

***

The henna on Saanvi's hands mirrored the storm swirling in her heart. Each dot bloomed with hope, and each line traced the promise of a future yet to be written.

The scent of jasmine and ghee mingled with the sharp sting of her unshed tears. Each marriage ritual, once a joyous celebration of her childhood, now felt like a chisel carving away at the familiar walls of her home.

Her mother, draped in a sari the color of fading dusk, held her hand, though the warmth barely penetrated the chill of impending separation. Her father, his eyes rimmed with red, offered a shaky smile, each wrinkle etched deeper by unspoken pain.

As Saanvi sat in her heavily embellished bridal lehenga, surrounded by cousins full of excitement, she remained unaware that her mischievous cousins were hatching a plan right in front of her.

One cousin, Shikha, whispered conspiratorially, "Hey, wouldn't it be hilarious if we made Saanvi Di's entry to 'Azeem-o-Shaan Shehenshah' from Jodhaa Akbar and Manav's entry to 'Din Shagna Da'?"

Another cousin, Anjali, chimed in eagerly, "Oh, that would be epic! Imagine Saanvi Di entering like a prince, and Manav following as a gorgeous princess!"

Saanvi, overhearing their conversation, couldn't help but chuckle at their playful banter. "Guys, seriously? This is my big day, not a Bollywood comedy scene!"

But her cousins, undeterred, exchanged mischievous glances and teased her, "Oh, come on, Saanvi Di! It'll be so much fun! We've already told the DJ to set it up."

Laughter erupted from the other cousins.

"Exactly! Picture this: you, the beautiful bride, walking down the aisle to the song of a Mughal emperor," Shikha said, mimicking Akbar's royal stride.

Saanvi swatted her playfully. "This is my wedding, not a history lesson! And what about Manav? Why 'Din Shagna Da' for his entry?"

Anjali's eyes widened in mock horror. "Oh no, we can't have the groom feel left out, can we? We've got him covered too. Reversing the entry songs will be amazing—everyone will love it!"

Saanvi groaned, burying her face in her hands. "You are unbelievable!"

Despite her protests, she couldn't help but smile at their antics. Deep down, she knew their playful teasing was a sign of the strong bond they shared. With a sigh and a shake of her head, she relented, realizing their love and excitement were all part of the joyous celebration.

Saanvi's brother, Vijay, leaned against the doorframe of the room, his eyes taking in the familiar space that had always been hers—the room filled with their childhood memories. "Now that you're getting married," he began with a playful glint in his eyes, "can I have your room? And don't say no, you've got a bigger one now!"

Saanvi looked into his eyes, her heart swelling with a mix of emotions. "It's yours. You can have it," she said softly, her voice tinged with affection. She pulled him into a hug, feeling the

unfamiliar ache of letting go. "Just promise me you'll always take care of Maa and Papa, and never let them feel my absence."

Vijay hugged her back tightly, his voice muffled against her shoulder. "I will. I promise."

This was more than giving up a room—it was passing on a piece of her childhood, a part of their bond that would now belong to him.

***

The scent of sizzling onions filled the air as Saanvi, a seven-year-old whirlwind of energy with her ponytail bouncing, dashed into the kitchen. Her mom, Asha, a vision in a colorful dupatta, deftly maneuvered a spatula while keeping a watchful eye on a bubbling pot.

"Mommy, Mommy, Mommy!" Saanvi chanted, her voice climbing with each repetition.

Asha turned, a playful smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "Saanvi, little hurricane. One 'Mommy' will do. What's the emergency this time?"

Saanvi skidded to a stop in front of her, eyes wide and pleading. "A puppy, Mommy! Please? A fluffy, cuddly, slobbery, tail-wagging ball of cuteness!"

Asha raised an eyebrow, her smile turning teasing. "Saanvi, beta, we already have you bouncing around the house like a puppy. Why would we need another one?"

Saanvi gasped dramatically, clutching her stomach and throwing herself onto the floor in a theatrical display of despair. "The injustice! The utter cruelty!" she wailed. "How can you compare me, your own daughter, to a mere canine? My feelings are wounded! My heart is broken!"

Asha sighed, turning off the stove and kneeling beside Saanvi, trying (and failing) to hide her laughter. "Saanvi, beta, get up. You're being a drama queen. It's not cruelty, it's just... well, we don't have the space or time for another pet right now. Taking care of you is already a full-time job!"

Saanvi scrambled up, her theatrics melting away as quickly as they had arrived. She looked at her mom with a determined glint in her eyes. "But I promise I'll take care of everything! Walking, feeding, cleaning up after its... accidents! I'll do it all!"

Asha couldn't help but raise an eyebrow again. "Hmm, Saanvi, I don't think the neighbors would appreciate the nightly howling of your puppy."

Saanvi pondered this for a moment, then a grin spread across her face. "I know! But Mommy, please let me have a puppy. I'll follow all your instructions and be a good girl..."

Asha burst out laughing, the sound warm and genuine. She swept Saanvi into a hug, burying her face in her daughter's soft hair. "Oh, Saanvi, you're impossible! But your imagination is something else. Maybe, just maybe, when you're older and a little more responsible, we can talk about getting a furry friend for you, okay?"

Saanvi squeezed her mom tightly. "Deal! And until then, I'll keep practicing my puppy's bark. Woof! Woof!"

She unleashed a series of playful barks that echoed through the kitchen, filling the space with the joyous sound of a child's laughter and a mother's love.

***

The air vibrated with the pulsating beat of the dhol, a joyous chaos that announced the arrival of Manav's baraat.

As the baraat made its way through the busy streets, Manav, the groom, sat atop his beautifully decorated white horse, adorned in traditional wedding attire. Among the dancing and cheering baraatis, Manav's Mausa ji took on the role of traffic police, expertly navigating the sea of vehicles to make way for the procession.

"*Arre bhai, left se jao*!" (Hey brother, go left!) he bellowed, his voice carrying over the din of honking horns. A rickshaw swerved, narrowly missing his protruding belly.

"*Baraat aa rahi hai*!" (The wedding procession is coming!) he announced, puffing out his chest. The baraat continued its march forward, led by Manav atop the white horse.

With exaggerated hand gestures and a booming voice, Mausa ji directed cars and rickshaws with comical precision, earning laughter and applause from the onlookers.

Manav's friends, fueled by nervous excitement and a healthy dose of adrenaline, were a spectacle in themselves. Two of them writhed on the ground, mimicking a pair of lovesick nagins (female cobras) locked in a dramatic dance battle. They managed to contort their bodies into serpentine shapes, slithering on the ground and hissing like *naagins* (cobra queens). Another friend, not to be outdone, had fashioned a makeshift *Been* (snake charmer's flute) out of his handkerchief and was enthusiastically playing imaginary tunes, much to the amusement of the onlookers.

Suddenly, the joyous chaos reached a new level with the arrival of Fufa ji, the self-proclaimed "King of Notes." Dressed in a sherwani that seemed perpetually on the verge of bursting at the seams. He weaved through the crowd, showering everyone with a multicolored barrage of rupee notes. Children squealed with delight, scrambling to collect the falling notes, while elders playfully swatted at Fufa ji, admonishing him for his extravagance.

Manav's cousin sister and her maasi were the true stars of the baraat. With their hair flowing freely and their dance moves on point, they grooved to the beats of the dhol, adding a touch of grace and energy to the procession. Their infectious enthusiasm had the entire baraat cheering and joining in the revelry.

In a hilarious turn of events, a group of enthusiastic baraatis caught hold of Manav's shy Mama ji and persistently tried to get him to dance.

Despite his protests of "*Arrey nahi, nahi, mujhse nahi hoga*!" (No, no, I can't do it!), they continued to drag him into the center of the dancing circle, determined to get him to shake a leg.

In the middle of laughter and celebrations, the baraat made its way to Saanvi's home, a lively procession that captured the joy and excitement of the occasion. When Manav finally reached Saanvi's doorstep, ready to begin the next chapter of his life, he felt proud for the love and laughter surrounding him on this special day.

***

In 2003, the world seemed simpler, with concerns about the future still distant on the horizon. School was a haven where friendships flourished, untouched by the complexities of society. Here, distinctions of caste, religion, and other divides faded into insignificance amidst shared experiences.

The shrill sound of the morning bell at Saanvi's school pierced the pre-dawn drowsiness. Students, bleary-eyed and dressed in rumpled uniforms, shuffled out of classrooms, forming a human caterpillar that snaked its way toward the assembly ground.

They hurriedly lined up in their respective class queues, arms stretched out to maintain the mandatory "arm's length" distance. Some were half-awake, some tried to straighten their uniforms, while others simply tried to avoid eye contact with the strict teachers.

Every morning assembly began with the school prayer, followed by a powerful rendition of the national anthem, "Jana Gana Mana," which instilled a sense of patriotism and unity among students.

During the morning prayer, many students slyly opened one eye, scanning the rows to catch any unfortunate soul not following the prayer protocol. They also searched for classmates who were more captivated by the fight brewing between two squirrels on a nearby tree than by the morning prayer.

After the assembly, the mad rush to get to their respective classes began. Textbooks, forgotten like yesterday's homework, were bartered with lightning speed. "Psst, Rahul, got that Math textbook? Mine is chilling at home, enjoying a vacation!" whispers crisscrossed the

corridors, punctuated by occasional exasperated sighs like, “Dude, I forgot mine too!”

Cue the legendary "Great Book Smuggling Operation," where resourceful students discreetly slipped books from their classmates' bags, hoping to avoid detection.

It was about textbooks and tests, building a foundation of knowledge, and forging bonds of friendship that would last a lifetime. It was a time when classrooms had giant green chalkboards instead of whiteboards or smart boards. The distinct smell of chalk dust in the air was a quintessential part of her school experience. There was something magical about cracking open a fresh, pristine notebook, carefully writing your name on the sticker pasted on the cover, and eagerly awaiting the knowledge that would fill its pages.

Amidst ongoing lessons, mischief brewed. Whether it was covert chit-chatting, playful poking of the student in front, or exchanging notes disguised as doodles, students found endless ways to amuse themselves during lectures.

The occasional “*pssst*” and stifled giggle would interrupt the lecture, a constant reminder of the students' mischievous energy.

The teacher, a seasoned veteran in the battle against classroom mischief, would employ her arsenal of withering stares and pointed questions, but a well-timed cough from a friend or a perfectly placed eraser strategically dropped to the floor always managed to create a diversion.

Every student lived in fear of the infamous chalk duster assault. If a student was caught dozing off or not paying attention in class, the teacher would mercilessly hurl a chalk piece or duster at them, startling them back to reality, often leaving a dusty imprint on their uniform.

Ah, the dreaded moment of homework submission! To minimize the chances of their notebooks being picked first, students would strategically place their notebooks at the bottom of the pile, creating a tower of notebooks on the teacher's desk.

Recess was a time for unleashing pent-up energy on the playground. From intense cricket matches (often played with makeshift bats and balls crafted from notebooks and rubber bands) to heated games of kho-kho or kabaddi, the playground was a battleground where friendships were forged and rivalries were born.

Apart from games, what would recess be without food? Saanvi, armed with her mother's legendary parathas and *aam ka achaar* (mango pickle), sometimes traded them for sandwiches and other delicacies in her friends' tiffin boxes—and sometimes, it was the other way around.

The afternoon classes, after lunch, were lazy; heads drooped like wilted sunflowers, and the only sound was the rhythmic scratching of pens against paper—or maybe the gentle snores of someone who'd fallen asleep mid-sentence.

In many classrooms, the last row of benches was considered prime real estate, with students vying for these coveted seats to engage in mischief or catch a quick nap during lectures. Saanvi's favorite part of the class was when the teachers started telling stories about their lives, and the entire class relaxed, relieved from the boring studies.

The excitement was different on Annual Day or other school functions. "Did you see the costume designs?" a girl whispered to Saanvi, her eyes sparkling with happiness. "I can't wait to get on that stage!" The rehearsals were intense, the costumes meticulously crafted, but the thrill of the upcoming performance kept everyone going. The thought of being under the spotlight, even for a few minutes, made all the hard work worth it.

During free periods when a teacher was absent, armed with pens or pieces of chalk, the students would sneakily draw on the school walls, turning them into canvases for their artistic expressions. "Look at this!" a boy exclaimed, showing off his latest doodle to his friends. The tables and benches, too, bore the marks of creative minds—names, doodles, and messages carved into the wood, little pieces of themselves left behind in the school.

Days like these were the norm, but exam days were a different story altogether. Students nervously glanced at each other, exchanging silent wishes of good luck.

Saanvi always aced her tests and exams—her report cards were shining proof of her hard work. But no matter how much she studied, a swarm of butterflies would take permanent residence in her stomach the moment the question paper hit the desk. It wasn't a lack of preparation; it was the sheer pressure, the feeling of everything hinging on those few precious hours.

The corridors outside the exam hall resembled a mini Everest, with a mountain of student backpacks piled high, each one overflowing with textbooks, last-minute notes, and lucky charms. Inside, the silence was broken only by the rhythmic scratching of pencils and the nervous shuffling of papers. But even in this tense atmosphere, a mischievous glint could occasionally be seen in a student's eye.

A sly smile exchanged with a friend, a joke that sent a ripple of suppressed laughter through a row, a hidden cheat sheet tucked inside the pencil box, and answers exchanged with the speed and precision of a well-rehearsed heist—these tiny acts of rebellion created a shared language.

And then, at last, there was report card day—a mix of anxiety and excitement swirling in the air. Saanvi clutched her report card tightly as she walked home, imagining her parents' proud smiles. "*I hope they like my grades*," she thought, the happiness of showing them her hard-earned results making her heart race.

These were the halcyon days of Saanvi's school life, a treasured era of uncomplicated joy.

***

The wedding photographer at Saanvi's wedding darted through the chaos, his lens trained on the couple's smiles, giggles, and even the quarrels between Fufaji and other relatives during the marriage function.

Click! A candid moment captured. Click! A group shot, with relatives squeezed together, grinning from ear to ear.

The photographer sighed, adjusting his lens. "Okay, everyone, squeeze in. Uncleji, please move left. No, my left!"

Family members jostled for position with the couple on stage. One enthusiastic relative inserted himself into every frame, much to everyone's amusement.

The photographer leapt onto chairs, twisting and turning as he chased the perfect angle. Laughter erupted as he dodged flying dupattas and wandering children.

But his work wasn't done until he'd photographed every single person savoring the food. From matchmaking aunties to distant Mamajis—all caught in the act of eating, their faces lit with delight.

Click! The photographer pressed the button. "Perfect!" he exclaimed, snapping rapid-fire shots of guests mid-bite, with *gulab jamun* frozen halfway to open mouths.

***

It was English class at Saanvi's school. As Mrs. Ahlawat, their English teacher, entered the room, a symphony began.

"Goooood Morrrrrrniiiiiiiing, Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaam!" the class bellowed, stretching the vowels like a rubber band. Mrs. Ahlawat, bless her heart, just blinked, her eyebrows permanently arched in a surprised, parrot-like pose.

The classroom was abuzz with concentration when, without warning, Saanvi's book slipped from her grasp, sliding to the floor with a soft thud. The room froze. Thirty pairs of eyes darted anxiously toward the book. A hush descended, replaced by a flurry of whispered warnings: "Vidya Devi will be furious!"

There was an unspoken rule in school days of not stepping on books or anything that had academic value because *Maa Saraswati* was believed to reside in them. *Maa Saraswati*, or *Vidya Devi*, the goddess

of knowledge, apparently had a temper tantrum every time a book touched the ground. The only way to appease her? A full-blown prostration. So, one by one, with exaggerated sighs and mumbled apologies, they touched the book with their foreheads, seeking forgiveness from the goddess.

Mrs. Ahlawat, ever the pragmatist, couldn't resist a smile at the sight of her classroom turned into a makeshift temple, complete with bowing devotees and a tattered notebook as the idol.

Classes, as usual, were a mixed bag of boredom and occasional fun. English literature morphed into origami adventures.

A paper airplane, expertly crafted from a discarded test paper, would soar across the room, chased by a chorus of "Woohoo!"s and mock protests from the teacher.

And so, the day would come to an end every day, a messy but lovely time full of lessons, laughter, and the occasional prostration to the *Goddess Saraswati*. Even the most ordinary classrooms can be extraordinary if you just know where to look—or in this case, where to bow!

***

Graceful garlands of jasmine and marigolds adorned the entrance to Saanvi's home. Saanvi, a vision in crimson silk, stood in bridal chamber, her nervousness soothed by the gentle humming of marriage songs sung by her aunts.

The rhythmic beats of the dhol resonated through the garden, accompanied by the melodic chants of the pandit. Manav, waiting at the mandap, stood tall and handsome in his ivory sherwani, his eyes gleaming with love as the palanquin drew closer.

The *mangalsutra*, a golden thread of time, bound hearts, etching an unbreakable promise on Saanvi's skin. It shone not just with metal but with the warmth of love, the glow of a future built together.

Manav gently applied *sindoor* to her forehead, staining her parting with the crimson promise of forever. Each ritual, each touch, wrote a new chapter, a future where two lives would become one.

The *sindoor* against her forehead, felt like a brand, marking her transition from daughter to wife. As she bowed before her parents, the weight of their blessings pressed down on her like a fallen sky. Their tears, mirroring her own, expressed a silent shared grief.

The *kanyadan*, the final act of surrender, ripped the air apart. Her father, voice choked with emotion, placed Saanvi's hand in her soon-to-be husband's.

"The *saat phere*, or seven circumambulations, is one of the most important features of a Hindu wedding, involving seven rounds around *Agni* (a sacred fire) lit for the purpose amidst Vedic mantras. The bride and groom circumambulate the consecrated fire seven times, reciting vows with each circuit, known as parikrama. Vows made in the presence of the sacred fire, are considered unbreakable, with *Agnideva* (God of Fire) witnessing and blessing the couple's union. According to the *Vedas*, this is the lord's ritual of acceptance of the soul, and every *phera* holds specific meaning," the priest explained calmly.

The priest, an aged man, held an ocean of wisdom inside him. He was the family priest of Saanvi's household and had conducted all the holy rituals for decades. Now, he was guiding her through her wedding.

Saanvi and Manav were ready to start their seven circumambulations around the sacred fire.

The priest said, "I will explain the significance of each *phera* as you go along. The *first phera* is about promising each other nourishment, prosperity, and happiness. The groom promises, '*Om esha ekapadi bhava iti prathaman*,' meaning he will provide her with happiness, food, and care. The bride responds, '*Dhanam dhanyam pade vadet*,' pledging to look after him and his family, sharing responsibilities in managing the home, food, and finances.

With the *first phera*, the couple invokes the gods for pure and nourishing food and a noble, respectful life."

In the *second phera*, the couple prays for physical and mental strength to lead a blissful life. The groom recites, '*Om oorje jara dastayaha*,' seeking strength from the gods to protect their home and children. The bride responds, '*Kutumburn rakshayishyammi sa aravindharam*,' promising to be his courage and strength throughout life and encouraging him in his endeavors. She asks him to love her exclusively.

With the *second phera*, they pray for strength, health, and a peaceful life.

In the *third phera*, the couple prays for wealth, and the bride promises loyalty in their union. The groom vows, '*Om Rayas Santu Joraa Dastayaha*,' meaning, 'I will work hard for wealth, provide a good education to our children, and pray for their long lives.' The bride promises to love him devotedly, making all other men secondary to him. She chants, '*Tava Bhakti as Vadedvachacha.*'

The *third phera* focuses on spiritual obligations and seeking divine strength.

In the *fourth phera*, they vow to bring each other happiness and respect. The groom says, '*Om Mayo Bhavyas Jaradastaya ha*,' thanking his wife for making his life sacred and praying for obedient children. The bride responds with '*Lalayami Cha Pade Vadet*,' promising to shower him with joy.

This *phera* emphasizes happiness and harmony through mutual love and trust.

The priest continued, "The *fifth phera* is to pray for noble children and the welfare of all living beings. The groom recites, '*Om Prajabhayaha Santu Jaradastayaha*,' declaring his wife his best friend and seeking blessings for her. The bride promises to love him until her last breath and make his happiness her own. She recites, '*Arte Arba Sapade Vadet.*'

This *phera* focuses on the welfare of the universe and noble progeny.

In the *sixth phera*, the groom asks, '*Rutubhyah shat padi bhava*,' meaning, 'You have filled my heart with happiness. Will you walk with me like this forever?' The bride replies, '*Yajna Hom Shashthe Vacho Vadet*,' promising to stand by him and always bring him happiness.

This *phera* seeks bountiful seasons and the strength to face life together.

The *seventh and final phera* seals their bond. The groom recites, '*Om Sakhi Jaradastayahga*,' declaring them husband and wife for eternity. The bride responds, '*Attramshe Sakshino Vadet Pade*,' pledging eternal love and companionship.

The *seventh phera* prays for loyalty, unity, and peace for the universe." The priest concluded his explanations to them once the seven pheras were finished.

Saanvi and Manav completed all seven circumambulations, sealing the eternal bond of their new life together.

The rice shower, a rain of blessings, promised prosperity and abundance. Each grain was a silent prayer for their journey, as blessed as the earth beneath their feet.

The blessings from elders, their wisdom echoing through generations, resonated deeply. Saanvi and Manav received them not just as words but as seeds of love and understanding to nurture in their garden of togetherness.

***

The doorbell's shrill cry cut through Saanvi's morning haze. It was a school holiday, but before she could even disentangle herself from her sleep-induced cocoon, the rhythmic clanging of metal announced the arrival of Maasi.

Saanvi grinned. Maasi, their maternal aunt, was notorious for two things: her bone-crushing hugs and her uncanny ability to time her visits with legendary Malai Ghevar from Dulichand Sweets in Jhajjar.

And while they loved both in equal measure, the Ghevar held a special, sugar-coated place in their hearts.

Maasi's arrival was heralded by the sound of her own contagious laughter, which spilled into the house like sunlight, brightening each room and chasing away any shadows. Saanvi and Vijay, their eyes wide as saucers, materialized from their rooms, their sleep quickly forgotten.

"*Aa jao, Saanvi aur Vijay, kaise ho mere bachhon!*" (Come, Saanvi and Vijay, how are you, my children!) Maasi chuckled, her voice thick with love.

Maasi produced the treasure: a large, golden disc placed in a crumpled paper bag. Saanvi and Vijay, their noses twitching eagerly, hovered around the offering.

"*Namaste Maasi! Hum achhe hain, aap kaisi hain?*" (Hello Aunty! We are good, how are you?) Saanvi chirped, her voice warm with affection. Taking another bite of the Ghevar, she savored the sweet, syrupy goodness, sharing a smile with Vijay by her side.

Vijay, his eyes closed in bliss, mumbled, "Yeh *Ghevar mera favorite hai, Maasi, aap roj aaya karo!*" (This sweet is my favorite, Aunty, you should come every day.)

Maasi beamed, her heart swelling with pride. "*Dulichand Sweets ka Ghevar toh Jhajjar mein sabse famous hai, na? Isliye main hamesha tumhare aur Saanvi ke liye laati hoon.*" (Dulichand Sweets' Ghevar is the most famous in Jhajjar, isn't it? That's why I always bring it for you and Saanvi.)

The Ghevar became a bridge between generations, a shared language of love and nostalgia. Each bite conjured memories of childhood summers spent in Jhajjar, chasing kites under the relentless sun, the air thick with the scent of freshly fried Ghevar.

***

For Manav, the marriage marriage was not really a union of souls; it was an ascent to a throne unlike any other. He didn't simply marry Saanvi—he became the custodian of a universe. A universe where a

father, with eyes full of unspoken promises, surrendered his daughter— a piece of his own beating heart.

This father had not merely given away his daughter but offered up a fragment of his very soul. Saanvi, his little sparrow, who chirped with laughter and filled his days with sunshine, was now entrusted to another's care. Yet, in Manav's eyes, the father saw a reflection of his own love—a silent vow to cherish Saanvi as he cherished his own breath.

Saanvi's mother, a woman whose gentle smile belied the storms she had weathered, had parted with a treasure beyond compare. Saanvi, her laughter, her reason for being, was now someone else's to cherish. A mother, who could move mountains for her world, was gifting away her most prized possession. The little doll who once played in her lap was now leaving, and all that remained was a mother's prayer for her daughter's well-being.

A brother, with a fierce protectiveness that rivaled a lion's, handed over his confidante, his shadow, his best friend. He watched his sister transform into a radiant bride, an ache tugging at his heart. But with a smile that held both pride and a trace of sadness, he let go of his dearest companion, believing that in Manav, Saanvi had found a friend who would walk beside her through sunshine and storm.

Manav, unaware of the magnitude of his newfound wealth, held Saanvi's hand—a fragile porcelain cup cradling the fiercest storm.

He didn't understand that he had become the richest man in the world with Saanvi by his side, he had inherited a treasure far greater than any earthly wealth— a love built on devotion, sacrifice, and faith.

***

With a heart full of love for Saanvi and Vijay, it was time for Maasi to depart after a delightful visit. Maasi's generosity knew no bounds—her purse seemed like a bottomless pit of money and sweet promises.

The ritual unfolded like a well-rehearsed play. Maasi, after a round of sugary compliments for Asha's impeccable housekeeping, turned to Saanvi and Vijay, their faces still sticky with remnants of Ghevar.

But Maasi was no naive sapling. "Such good manners, these children!" she exclaimed, pinching Saanvi's cheek and showering Vijay with a sugary smile. "Must be rewarded, no?" And before anyone could protest, two crisp five-hundred-rupee notes materialized in her trembling hand.

Saanvi's and Vijay's hearts leaped like popcorn kernels in hot oil. This was jackpot territory! Visions of candy carts and ice cream palaces danced in their heads. But even their wildest dreams couldn't have predicted their mother's next move.

As their hands reached out hesitantly, before they could touch it, their mother's hand descended, like an eagle swooping down to snatch its prey. *"Are, iski kya jarurat hai?* (Hey, what is the need for this?)" she huffed, her voice laced with mock annoyance. "They already have enough sweets, don't they?"

Saanvi and Vijay's faces wilted like balloons deflating. Their hearts, filled with secret glee a moment ago, now felt like punctured kites, fluttering with the fear of another "no."

Maasi, sensing the tension, chimed in, "Oh, come on, Asha di! Let them have some fun. It's not like they're asking for gold coins."

Asha, never one to back down from a playful battle, countered, "They'll get spoiled. Too much money is bad for them!"

The back-and-forth banter continued, a verbal tug-of-war over the fate of the five-hundred-rupee notes. Saanvi and Vijay, caught in the crossfire, could only watch, their hopes rising and falling with each word.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Asha relented. With a sigh and a playful glare at her sister, she handed the notes back. "Alright, alright, fine! But if they get cavities, don't blame me."

Saanvi and Vijay, their hearts leaping with joy, silently grabbed the notes like starving birds diving for crumbs. The forbidden money, once a mirage, now felt as real as the sticky sweetness on their fingers.

***

The vermilion on Saanvi's forehead felt like a cruel mockery against the whitewashed walls of her childhood bedroom. Laughter, once a familiar melody, now echoed hollowly, bouncing off the now-empty shelves and the framed photos of a life that was no longer hers.

She wished she could stay a bit longer, but the moment of vidai (farewell) had arrived. Each step toward the door felt like heartbreak, each goodbye to her family like a piece of her heart shattering on the floor.

Her father's parting words were a fervent blessing: "Be happy, Saanvi." Happiness felt like a foreign concept, a distant shore she could no longer see through the mist of her tears.

She remembered her mother's words: "*Saanvi beta, you've grown up so fast. Remember when you used to play dress-up in my saris? It seems like just yesterday. Every journey is a homecoming, Saanvi. You carry your home within you, wherever you go. Be happy, always*."

The car engine roared, a mechanical beast tearing at the fabric of her world. Every familiar turn, every landmark in Jhajjar, brought back memories of stolen afternoons with friends, of mango stains on her clothes, of quiet conversations under the starlit sky. Now, they were mere scenery in a film reel of a life she could only watch, not touch.

***

Saanvi's classroom was filled with chatter. Mr. Singh, a stern man with a passion for quadratic equations, his voice a counterpoint to the rustling of notebooks.

Mr. Singh swooped down the aisle like a hawk searching for prey, his red pen poised like a deadly weapon. Saanvi squirmed in her seat, her palms slick with nervous sweat. Today, he was checking the homework he had assigned previously, and a nagging guilt gnawed at her stomach—the worksheet on quadratic equations lay forgotten at home, a casualty of her intense afternoon spent gazing at the latest cloud formations.

Just as Mr. Singh reached Saanvi's desk, a sheepish voice piped up from behind.

"Sir, Sir," it was Rahul, the resident class clown, "*Homework karna bhool gaya sir*!" (I forgot to do the homework!)

A collective groan rippled through the class. This was Rahul's go-to excuse, as predictable as the rising sun. Mr. Singh, however, was a seasoned warrior, honed in the fires of countless homework battles.

Pausing dramatically, he fixed Rahul with a stare that could curdle milk. "*Homework karna bhool gaye?*" (Forgot to do the homework?) he echoed, his voice dripping with mock surprise. "*Lekin Rahul*," he continued, leaning closer, a sly glint in his eyes, "*khana khana to nahi bhoole hoge?*" (But I bet you didn't forget to eat dinner?)

The class erupted in laughter. Rahul's cheeks flushed red, and he mumbled a barely audible apology, his excuse evaporating faster than a snowball on a hot day. Mr. Singh's smile was both triumphant and knowing, a reminder that teachers, like parents, possessed an uncanny ability to see through the flimsiest of excuses.

Saanvi, using this brief window of opportunity, mustered her most innocent smile. "Good morning, sir," she chirped, hoping to deflect attention away from her own empty desk. Mr. Singh's gaze fell on Saanvi, a knowing glint in his eye.

The bell for the next period chimed, offering a reprieve, but Saanvi knew the homework monster wasn't vanquished yet.

***

A new chapter quietly began for Saanvi as the car reached Manav's home in Gurgaon.

The vehicle slowed and then stopped. Saanvi's heart raced as she gazed at the unfamiliar house looming before her—Manav's house, now hers. She quietly reminded herself of this new reality.

Marigold garlands still hung from the doorway, swaying gently in the morning breeze.

She stepped out of the car, her anklets jingling, announcing her arrival.

The morning began with the sacred griha pravesh, a ritual to welcome Saanvi into her new home. As she crossed the threshold with a brass *kalash* (pot) filled with rice and blessings, the soft clatter of rice grains beneath her feet added a joyful rhythm to their vows.

Next, the couple participated in the traditional ceremonies at the groom's home.

Later, as the sun climbed higher, Manav and Saanvi sat among Manav's relatives, sharing stories and laughter.

In the days that followed, wedding memories slowly faded, giving way to the gentle pace of new routines. Saanvi, now wrapped in the familiar comfort of saris, explored her new home, uncovering its hidden corners and finding happiness in daily routines.

Evenings were spent on the terrace, watching stars appear as they shared dreams, shadows drifting around them in the night. Mornings began with shared cups of chai, the silence broken only by sparrows chirping and the soft exchange of plans for the day.

As days blended into weeks, Saanvi's leave ended, and she had to return to her office in Varanasi. Manav remained in Gurgaon, immersed in his corporate world. Though apart, Saanvi and Manav began to weave their lives into a long-distance marriage.

***

With the school's summer vacation approaching, Saanvi and her elder brother, Vijay, were eager to visit their Nani and Nana's (maternal grandparents') house.

Excitement bubbled in Saanvi's chest as she peeked out the window of the vehicle. The sounds of car honks and the busy streets faded away as Saanvi and her family approached the familiar embrace of her Nani and Nana's home.

As soon as they stepped inside, the warmth of their grandparent's love enveloped them. Nani rushed forward, her saree billowing around

her. “Saanvi, beta!” she exclaimed, her eyes shining with affection. She wrapped Saanvi in a hug that smelled of comfort and cardamom. “I’ve missed you so much,” she whispered, showering Saanvi with kisses.

Saanvi felt like the most special grandchild in the world. Nani’s wrinkled hands, cool and comforting, brushed away any lingering travel fatigue. “Come, come, you must be hungry,” Nani said, guiding them inside.

“And where’s my little champion?” Nana’s booming voice filled the room.

Vijay’s eyes lit up. “Nana!”

“Ho ho! What’s this? Your pockets seem empty.”

Nana pretended as if he were about to perform a magic trick, his hands moving with mystery and a playful glint in his eyes. “Ah, there you are!” he said, a twinkle in his eye. His pockets, as always, magically produced candies. “How many have you had already on your way?” he teased, handing them out to Saanvi and Vijay.

“Only a few, Nana,” Saanvi giggled, taking the candy.

Vacations at Nani and Nana’s home were nothing short of magical. The creak of the ceiling fan, the sound of Nani humming old Hindi film songs as she cooked up a feast of puris and aloo ki sabzi filled the air. “Nani, your puris are delicious!” Saanvi exclaimed, savoring the first bite.

“And there’s more,” Nani replied with a smile, her eyes twinkling.

Outside, the sounds of neighborhood children playing cricket in the dusty lane added to the happiness of their perfect day. “Can we join them, Nana?” Vijay asked, his eyes wide with excitement.

“Of course, but first, let’s finish your meal,” Nana said warmly.

The day passed with beautiful moments of fun and chit-chatting.

In the evening, Saanvi headed toward the roof. “Race you to the roof!” she called, darting ahead as Vijay scrambled to catch up. They rushed up the narrow stairs, their laughter echoing in the cool evening air. Once on the roof, Saanvi grabbed the small bucket by the

door and splashed water across the surface, the droplets glistening in the fading light.

"Cool enough yet?" Vijay asked, flopping onto the charpoy and spreading out his arms.

"Just give it a minute," Saanvi replied, lying down beside him. Above them, the sky stretched wide, dotted with a million stars. The sound of crickets filled the air, their song mixing with the gentle rustling of leaves. "Look at that!" she whispered, pointing to a shooting star streaking across the sky.

"I'm never leaving this place," Vijay muttered, closing his eyes, the coolness of the damp roof seeping through the charpoy.

Listening to bedtime stories from their grandparents transported them to a world of wonder and imagination. The flickering glow of fireflies dancing in the twilight ignited a childlike wonder.

The next morning came gently, the soft chirping of birds pulling them from sleep. Saanvi stretched, inhaling the rich scent of breakfast wafting through the house. "Smell that? Nani's up," she grinned, nudging Vijay.

"Think she made chole bhature?" Vijay asked, already on his feet, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

They crept into the kitchen like thieves, but before they could snatch a treat, Nani's voice stopped them. "Caught you!" she teased, holding out a plate full of chole bhature. "Couldn't wait, could you?"

The taste of tangy, spicy pickles hit their tongues, and Saanvi's face lit up. "You make them better every year, Nani," she said, savoring the flavors that carried memories of summers past.

Later in the day, they found themselves in the dusty attic, pushing aside boxes and crates. "Look at this!" Vijay called, pulling out an old, worn trunk. Inside, they found faded photographs. "Wow! Old photos! Look, Nani and Nana when they were young!"

Saanvi's eyes widened. "And look, Mommy! She was so little!"

Vijay smiled. "Yeah, she must've been your age when this was taken."

"Mommy was so much prettier than me when she was young," Saanvi murmured, a hint of sadness in her voice as she stared at the picture of her mother.

"And what's this?" Vijay asked, pulling out an old, tattered board game. "Think it still works?"

Saanvi laughed. "Only one way to find out."

***

Back in Jhajjar, the house, once alive with Saanvi's laughter and chatter, had become a tomb of silence after her marriage. It filled with the absence of her nimble footsteps and the clatter of her bangles against empty mugs.

Though bestowed with the divine name of *Lakshmi* by her parents, Saanvi embodied more than just abundance and prosperity. She was the very foundation of their universe—the *Brahma* who laid the groundwork for their happiness. Her support was their *Vishnu*, the preserver of their well-being. And within her fierce spirit resided the strength of *Mahesh*, the destroyer of any obstacle that threatened their peace. She was the culmination of the divine, a force that ensured their family thrived with boundless love and strength.

Saanvi wasn't just *Lakshmi*; she was the *Brahma, Vishnu*, and *Mahesh* of her family. Now, after her marriage, she was gone.

Her father, a man whose eyes once shone with joy, now carried a permanent crease of grief between them. He wandered through the rooms like a lost soul, his hand trailing along the furniture as if searching for her warmth. The newspaper, once read aloud with gusto, now lay untouched, its pages rustling like dry leaves in the wind.

Her mother, the flame of the home, had dimmed to a flicker. Her skillful fingers, which once wove magic in the kitchen, now lay listless in her lap as she stared at the simmering pot on the stove—its forgotten aroma another cruel reminder of life departed.

Her brother, once Saanvi's shadow and confidante, now roamed the house like a wounded animal. Her absence was a gaping hole in his world, leaving him adrift in a sea of memories. The games they played, the secrets they shared, the dreams they saw—all felt like faint sounds in a deserted room.

***

"Come on, Vijay! We've got enough!" Saanvi shook her gullak, the clinking of coins inside echoing their excitement. "Let's go before the ice-cream seller goes away."

Vijay nodded, already rushing out the door, barefoot across the hot ground. They darted to the ice cream seller who arrived with his cart, ringing the brass bell to announce his arrival.

"Two soft cones, please!" Saanvi ordered, her eyes wide as the vendor swirled the creamy vanilla ice cream onto the cones.

The vendor handed them the cones, and they immediately started eating from the bottom. "This way, the best part lasts," Vijay said, savoring the cold sweetness on his tongue.

"Exactly," Saanvi agreed, licking the melting ice cream. "Vanilla and cherry on top are to be enjoyed at the end for long-lasting sweetness."

One lazy afternoon, Saanvi sat cross-legged on the veranda, a magazine splayed out in front of her. "I'm going to give her a better hairstyle," she announced, holding up her doll, a mischievous grin spreading across her face.

Vijay raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure about that?"

"Watch me," she replied confidently, snipping away with a pair of blunt scissors. But as the strands of hair fell unevenly to the floor, her excitement turned to panic. The doll's once perfect hair was now a patchy mess. Tears welled up in her eyes as she realized her mistake.

"I—I ruined her!" Saanvi sniffed, holding up the doll in despair.

Nani appeared, her soft hands resting on Saanvi's shoulders. "Come here, beta," she said gently, pulling Saanvi into a warm hug.

"It's alright, we all make mistakes. Next time, let's take our time, hmm? Patience is a good teacher."

Saanvi wiped her eyes, her heart heavy with regret, but Nani's soothing voice made the burden lighter. "I'll remember, Nani," she whispered, feeling the comfort of her grandmother's understanding.

Like this, the splendid days of their summer vacation flowed, filled with joy, laughter, and occasional moments of learning. But as all good things must, their summer vacation at Nani and Nana's house came to an end. They stood by the gate, suitcases packed, and the car waiting. Saanvi clung to Nani's saree, burying her face in the soft fabric. "I don't want to go, Nani," she cried, her voice small, knowing that a year felt like forever.

Nani's eyes were soft with tears, but she smiled and kissed Saanvi's forehead. "Time flies when we're having fun, doesn't it? I also don't want you to go, but vacations are over, and you have to study to become successful, na!"

Vijay tugged at Nana's shirt. "Will you visit us?"

"Of course," Nana replied, his voice gruff with emotion. "Who else will beat me at chess?"

As they drove away, Saanvi looked back at the house—her safe haven, where time moved slower and every moment was filled with love. She waved until the house was out of sight.

Back home, the silence was deafening. The routine of school resumed, but a part of Saanvi still lingered at her Nani and Nana's house, surrounded by the aroma of crispy pakoras, the creaking of the ceiling fan, Nani's laughter, and the comfort of Nana's stories. The house felt a little quieter, a little emptier, as she longed for the warmth and unconditional love that only grandparents could provide.

***

Saanvi believed wholeheartedly in the sanctity of marriage.

Distanced from Manav because of her demanding career in banking, she often felt guilty about being in Varanasi while he was in

Gurgaon, unable to spend more time with him. Despite the physical distance between them, she made every effort to maintain the warmth in their long-distance marriage.

Determined to bridge the gap, she left no stone unturned. She applied for a transfer on spouse grounds, hoping to relocate to Gurgaon to be with him. Whenever possible, she would use her limited leave—even if just for two days—to visit Manav, nurturing their relationship with each fleeting moment together.

However, as time passed, the colorful hues of their relationship began to fade. Manav, who had once seemed attentive and loving, started to take Saanvi's love for granted.

Each morning, just as the sun began to rise, Saanvi would dial Manav's number before leaving for the office, her voice gentle yet hopeful. "Good morning. How did you sleep?"

Later, after a long day at work, she would call again, her routine as steady as the ticking clock on her desk. "I'm home," she'd say, her tired smile almost audible through the phone.

She had followed this ritual of calling Manav every day, without fail, since returning to Varanasi after their marriage.

The clock read 11:45 PM. Her fingers hovered over her phone, the screen glowing with Manav's name. After a moment of hesitation, she pressed the call button. The familiar ringing filled her apartment in Varanasi, echoing off the walls. It rang once, twice, thrice… she was about to disconnect, assuming Manav was asleep, but then the screen flashed "Call connected."

"Hello?" Manav's voice was distant, almost mechanical.

"Hi, Manav! How was your day?" Saanvi's voice was bright, trying to bridge the miles between them.

"Busy. Yours?" His tone was clipped, as if he was already looking for a way out of the conversation.

"Same here. The bank was hectic, but I managed to send some gifts to your parents. Did they like them?" She bit her lip, hoping for a spark of enthusiasm.

"They did. Thanks." Silence stretched between them, heavy and uncomfortable.

Saanvi glanced at the calendar on her table, counting the days until her next visit. "I'll be home in two months. I can't wait to see you."

"Yeah, sure." Manav's response was flat, devoid of the excitement she longed to hear.

Still, Saanvi went on, sharing details about her day, her colleagues, and the latest project she was working on. Manav listened, his responses short and distant. When the call ended, Saanvi busied herself with household chores.

Manav tossed his phone onto the couch and ran a hand through his hair. He glanced at the framed photo of Saanvi on the shelf, her smile bright and warm. But instead of comfort, it only deepened the knot of envy in his chest.

He had always felt that Saanvi was his treasure, his birthright.

"Why can't she just be here?" he muttered, pacing the room. "Why does she have to be so perfect, so... independent?"

He picked up the photo, staring at it as if it held the answers. "*Why can't she just leave her job and be with me? Why does she have to shine so brightly?*"

The more Saanvi succeeded at her work, the more Manav felt his own insecurities gnawing at him. Yet, he never voiced these thoughts, keeping his resentment hidden behind a mask of indifference.

Saanvi's visits to Manav's home in Gurgaon were rare, but when they occurred, she poured her heart into making them special. She would cook his favorite meals, plan outings, and shower his family with affection.

***

After the summer break, Saanvi settled back into her school routine. It was math period. The classroom was in chaos—paper airplanes

soaring across the room, voices echoing from the back. Mr. Singh, the stern mathematics teacher, had just entered, his eyes narrowing as he surveyed the disorder.

"Silence!" he barked, his voice cutting through the noise like a knife. "Who is responsible for all this noise?"

All fingers pointed towards the notorious backbenchers, Amit, Rahul, and Saurav, who were slouched in their seats, trying their best to appear invisible.

Amit, famous for his elaborate doodling skills on his desk, and Rahul, whose love affair with sleep often crossed the boundaries of the classroom, mumbled apologies that were lost in the rustling of notebooks.

Mr. Singh's nostrils flared. "You three, come to the front and sit with the girls," he commanded, his tone leaving no room for argument.

The backbenchers exchanged horrified looks. Moving from the safe haven of the back rows to the dreaded front seats, surrounded by the diligent girls, was a fate worse than detention.

The front row was not a normal place to sit in class; it was a warzone, a land of relentless questioning, laser focus, and the constant threat of being called upon to answer a theorem they hadn't the faintest clue about.

With heavy steps and flushed faces, the trio reluctantly made their way to the front, their eyes downcast as they took their seats beside the wide-eyed girls. Amit could feel the heat of embarrassment burning his cheeks, while Rahul fidgeted nervously, and Saurav tried his best to sink into his chair.

As they took their places, Saanvi and her friends sitting beside them exchanged amused glances, adding insult to injury.

The girls began whispering and giggling, throwing glances at the intruders in their domain. The backbenchers squirmed uncomfortably, their reputations as class clowns suddenly shattered by this humiliating punishment.

As Mr. Singh launched into his lesson, the backbenchers found themselves trapped in an unfamiliar world, a world where they were expected to pay attention, take notes, and participate in class discussions. The safe haven of the back rows, where they could indulge in their mischievous antics, seemed like a distant memory.

Mr. Singh's smile widened further. "Excellent! Now, class, let's start Chapter Seven, Coordinate Geometry..."

***

Saanvi sailed her tiny boat on a professional journey that eventually elevated her to new heights. Working as an officer in the bank's Administrative Office in Varanasi, she dedicated herself to her role with commitment. Her tireless efforts and attention to detail caught the attention of her superiors, leading to a well-deserved promotion to manager.

A hush fell over the office as Ram Kumar, Saanvi's manager, adjusted his spectacles, his eyes scanning the promotion results released earlier that day, March 31, 2026.

His voice, a warm rumble with a hint of his Deoghar origin, boomed, "Our Saanvi is promoted to Manager on her first attempt..."

Saanvi's eyes widened in disbelief. Tears welled up as she absorbed the news. It was a moment she had dreamed of, but hearing it from Ram Kumar, the mentor who had always believed in her, made it even more special.

Ram Kumar continued, "You have earned this through your determination. I have seen you grow from a shy, hesitant newcomer to a confident and capable leader."

Saanvi stood up and shook his hand, her voice choked with emotion. "Thank you, sir. I couldn't have done this without your guidance and support."

Gaurav's face lit up as he walked towards Saanvi. "Saanvi, congratulations! I just heard about your promotion!" He swept her

into a warm hug, beaming with pride. "You deserve it, you've worked so hard!"

"Oh my God, Saanvi! I knew it! I knew you'd get it!" Ankita cried, throwing her arms around her friend.

Saanvi hugged her back, a rush of gratitude and happiness filling her.

"You deserve this more than anyone," Ankita said, her voice full of pride. "I've seen how hard you work, and it's about time you got the recognition you deserve."

Saanvi smiled, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Thank you, Ankita. I couldn't have done it without you either." She added softly, "You know, prime numbers remind us that every person, moment, and experience is unique and irreplaceable—a one-of-a-kind treasure. And you, Ankita, Gaurav, and Ram Kumar Sir, are the best prime numbers of my career!"

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Saanvi's brow furrowed in frustration as she grappled with the algebra problem before her—a tangle of x's and y's that clung stubbornly like weeds. But unlike ordinary weeds, these algebraic mysteries held a strange allure. It wasn't merely the satisfaction of solving them or the triumphant click of logic falling into place. No, it was something deeper—an intimate conversation between numbers and shapes, a secret language of the universe unfolding before her eyes.

Just then, Mr. Singh, her math teacher, materialized beside her like a gentle math genie. He didn't scold or judge her confusion; instead, he knelt down and pointed to a specific line in the equation. "See, Saanvi," he said, his voice a soothing bassline to her math symphony, "here's where the logic takes a little turn. Think of x and y as characters in a story, each with their own journey. They might intersect here, diverge there, but it's all interconnected, you see?"

Mr. Singh's words acted as a bridge, spanning the gap between her confusion and comprehension. He wasn't merely teaching math;

he was revealing its beauty, its inherent poetry. Suddenly, the x's and y's ceased to be mere variables; they transformed into actors in a play, their movements guided by elegant laws of logic and symmetry.

As weeks turned into months, Saanvi's love for math blossomed even further. Algebra became a cakewalk for her. The Pythagorean theorem ceased to be a dry collection of numbers; it became a secret handshake between triangles and real-life things—a code unlocking the harmony of the world around her. And calculus, with its swirling curves and infinite possibilities, felt like art.

***

Saanvi's promotion came with a change in location. Despite being married to Manav, she was compelled to live in Varanasi because of her work; her transfer request to Gurgaon had not been approved.

Now, thanks to her promotion, she had been appointed as Manager at the Gurgaon Huda City Centre branch. The news filled her with excitement. She would finally be living in the same city as Manav, ending their long-distance marriage. Plus, her parents' home in Jhajjar was just an hour's drive away, making it easy to visit them whenever she wanted.

Saanvi's promotion also meant taking on the larger responsibility of managing an entire branch. She hesitated, her mind shadowed by the fear of the unknown. Then she recalled her mantra: "*Focus on the integrals, not the differentials. Savor the journey, not just the end result.*"

Thinking back to her calculus days, she visualized the graceful curve of an indefinite integral—the smooth flow of change leading toward an unknown but definite point. "*Life is like a continuous integration,*" she mused, "*a constant accumulation of experiences, both big and small.*"

And just like the integral, the sum of her journey—every twist and turn—would shape her future, making it something far more beautiful than her time in Varanasi ever could.

Saanvi's heart raced with excitement as she dialed Manav's number. The news of her promotion and transfer to Gurgaon felt like a dream come true. She couldn't wait to share it with him.

"Manav, guess what?" she said, her voice bubbling with joy.

"Hey, Saanvi! What's up?" Manav replied, trying to match her enthusiasm.

"I got promoted to manager! And the best part? I'm being transferred to Gurgaon! Can you believe it? We'll finally be together! I'll be joining the Gurgaon office next week. No more long distance!" Saanvi's words tumbled out in a rush.

There was a brief pause on the other end. Manav's mind raced, emotions swirling inside him. He forced a smile, though she couldn't see it.

"Wow, that's amazing, Saanvi! I'm so proud of you," he said, his voice steady and warm.

But inside, a knot tightened in his chest. Her success, her joy—it all felt like a spotlight on his own insecurities. He clenched his fist, the phone cool against his ear.

"Thank you, Manav! I can't wait to be with you," she continued, her happiness palpable.

"Yeah, it'll be great," he replied, his tone betraying none of the turmoil within. "We'll finally get to spend more time together."

As they talked, Saanvi's excitement painted vivid pictures of their future. Manav listened, nodding and agreeing, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Each word of her success felt like a reminder of his own stagnation, a shadow creeping over his confidence.

"Manav, are you there?" Saanvi's voice pulled him back.

"Yes, I'm here. Just thinking about how wonderful this is," he lied smoothly.

"Me too," she said, her voice softening. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too," he replied, the words tasting bitter. He ended the call with a promise to celebrate, but as he hung up, the smile faded from his face. The room felt colder, the silence heavier.

Manav stared at his reflection in the window, the city lights twinkling outside. Her success was a ray of light, but to him, it cast long, dark shadows. He sighed, feeling the weight of his own insecurities pressing down, as Saanvi's joy echoed in his mind.

***

Mr. Singh's math class was underway, but instead of the usual calculus or trigonometry, today Saanvi had a different lesson to share.

A new kind of energy stirred in her veins, a spark ignited by the Fibonacci sequence scribbled on the board.

Mr. Singh, with his gentle smile and perpetually messy hair, noticed her vibrancy. "Saanvi, care to share what's got you buzzing like a beehive?"

Saanvi's eyes shone with excitement. "Sir, it's the Fibonacci sequence! Look at it," she traced the numbers with her finger, "0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5... each number is the sum of the two before it. It's like a beautiful rhythm, a constant growth, always building upon what came before."

Mr. Singh leaned forward, intrigued. "And what does that rhythm tell you, Saanvi?"

A smile bloomed on Saanvi's face. "It tells me about life, sir! We start small, with nothing but potential. But then, with each step, each decision, we grow, we build upon who we were. We become the sum of our experiences, our choices, the lessons learned. And just like the Fibonacci sequence, the more we grow, the more we influence those around us. We become part of a bigger—a beautiful story woven from individual threads."

Mr. Singh's eyes twinkled. "A wonderful analogy, Saanvi! But what about the negative numbers? The mistakes, the setbacks?"

Saanvi's smile faltered for a moment, then returned, stronger than before. "Even the negative numbers, sir, are part of the rhythm. They might not be pleasant, but they teach us, they make us stronger. They're like the zeros in the sequence, moments of pause, of reflection, before we bounce back and continue our growth."

The class, initially skeptical, was now captivated. A boy in the back piped up, "So, even if we make mistakes, we can still be successful?"

Saanvi beamed. "Absolutely! The Fibonacci sequence shows us that even tiny beginnings can lead to amazing things. It's all about the journey, the constant growth, the learning from every step. Don't be afraid of mistakes; embrace them as part of your unique pattern."

The bell rang, and the classroom buzzed with a new energy. No longer just a collection of sleepy faces, they were seeds of potential, ready to grow, to learn, to build their own beautiful, unique sequences of life.

Mr. Singh watched his students leave, a smile touching his lips. He knew that math wasn't just about numbers; it was about revealing the hidden beauty of the universe. Sometimes, it was about a young girl who could find a life-changing message in the Fibonacci sequence, a message that echoed through the sterile halls of the school, whispering, "Grow, learn, become."

***

The glass walls of Saanvi's new office in Gurgaon's Huda City Centre Branch gleamed like a mirage, reflecting the city's relentless ambition.

Saanvi faced the challenges of adapting to a new environment, both professionally and personally. Her managerial role demanded not only financial acumen but also the ability to achieve targets across all parameters. Undeterred, she embraced her responsibilities with the same zeal that had defined her journey so far.

"Good morning, team!" Saanvi boomed, the mug in her hand sloshing dangerously. "Let's make today a goal-crushing monsoon, eh? Targets are waterfalls, deadlines are rainbows, and customer service is... sunshine after the storm!"

The team, each clutching a steaming mug of tea, chuckled at Saanvi's daily metaphors. It had only been a few days since she joined as their manager, but they were already used to it—Saanvi's quirky

enthusiasm was as much a part of the branch culture as the monthly reports and Excel sheets.

"Akash, VC at 10! Meenakshi, client meeting at 12! Rahul, that spreadsheet needs a makeover—add some charts, some graphs, maybe even dancing unicorns if you must!" Saanvi's instructions flew like rapid-fire.

Loan approvals, account queries, KYC nightmares—the endless cycle of transactions felt like a hamster wheel, spinning her dizzy. The pressure was a constant in her head.

The man who'd lost his life savings in a fraudulent online transaction because he shared his OTP, the woman whose business loan was denied becaue of low CIBIL score, the elderly couple struggling to navigate the digital banking—each face was a story, a burden she carried on her young shoulders.

There were moments of victory, of course. The first loan sanctioned to a young entrepreneur, the smile on a businessman's face after a successful commercial vehicle loan, the elderly woman whom Saanvi taught to use the ATM—these were the tiny lighthouses that guided her through the fog of doubt.

A small argument shattered the morning calm. Mrs. Sharma, a regular customer with a perpetual frown, stood at the counter, her debit card stuck in an endless loop of errors. Saanvi approached, armed with her signature smile and a stack of handwritten notes.

"Technical hiccups with your debit card, Mrs. Sharma? Don't you worry, let me fix this for you!"

A quick phone call to a techie friend in the IT Wing of NextGen Bank's Head Office solved the issue. A victory dance, a shared giggle, and Mrs. Sharma left, not just with her money, but with renewed faith in the universe, courtesy of Saanvi's quirky problem-solving.

Then there were the evenings, when the city lights blurred into one long, neon tear. Collapsing onto her bed, the weight of the day pressed down on her like a concrete slab. Loneliness gnawed at her.

After her promotion to Manager, she had settled down with Manav in Gurgaon.

Slowly but surely, she realized he was always busy with his work and had no time for her.

She tried to fill this loneliness with the happiness she found in her office work. She learned to navigate the corporate jungle, to find strength in the quiet moments of connection with her customers. She learned to celebrate the small victories, to find humor in the absurd, and to build a support system within the office walls.

***

Saanvi, was preparing for the most important journey of her academic career. Today was the day of her most crucial examination—her 12th Board exams, which would determine her future and set the course for the rest of her life. As she gathered her belongings and prepared to leave the house, she could feel the weight of nervousness building within her.

Just as she was about to step out the door, her mother, Asha, with a warm smile, called out to her. Saanvi turned to see her mother holding a small steel bowl, brimming with a steaming mixture of dahi-cheeni (yogurt and sugar).

"Wait, Saanvi," her mother said, her voice filled with love and concern, "You must have a little of this dahi-cheeni before you go. It will bring you luck and blessings, ensuring that you excel in your examination."

Saanvi hesitated for a moment, her mind racing with a thousand thoughts and a dozen doubts. But the warmth and sincerity in her mother's voice melted her reservations, and she approached her.

Her mother scooped a spoonful of the sweet, creamy mixture and held it out to Saanvi, her eyes filled with pride and hope. "Eat, my child," she said, her voice filled with love, "You have worked hard for this moment, and you are destined for greatness. The Gods will bring you luck, clarity, and wisdom in your examination."

Saanvi closed her eyes and took a deep breath, savoring the rich, tangy flavor of the dahi-cheeni as it melted on her tongue. She could feel the warmth of her mother's love and the blessings of the Gods coursing through her veins, filling her with a sense of confidence and determination.

***

The sun barely peeked over the horizon, but Saanvi was already awake. She rubbed her tired eyes, sitting up slowly, the heaviness of another long day ahead settling on her shoulders. There was no time to linger in bed. Manav needed breakfast, lunch had to be packed, and she had her own work to prepare for.

The kitchen lights glowed to life as she shuffled in, still in her nightclothes, her hair loosely tied back. The smell of fresh ginger and garlic filled the air as she sautéed vegetables, her mind already racing through the day's tasks. Her hands moved quickly, muscle memory guiding her through the familiar routine. Chapatis puffed on the stove, while she hurriedly packed lunchboxes—one for Manav, one for herself.

The pressure cooker whistle pierced the morning's silence. She poured Manav's tea and set it beside his parathas. Her own stomach grumbled, but she ignored it; there wasn't time. She took a sip of water, glancing at the clock. Already running late.

"Saanvi, did you pack my files?" Manav's voice came from the other room. She blinked, snapping back to reality and rushing to gather his things while the tea cooled on the table. Breakfast was ready, but hers would have to wait—again.

As Manav sat down to eat, Saanvi darted around the house, packing her bag, double-checking his lunchbox, and making sure nothing was forgotten. Her stomach churned with hunger, but she overlooked it, tucking her own lunch into her bag before pulling on her shoes. Manav finished his breakfast, barely noticing that she hadn't eaten.

She smiled, watching him leave. *Another day,* she thought, as she locked up behind him.

The commute to the office was a blur of honking cars and endless thoughts. By the time she sat at her desk, her stomach growled in reminder that she hadn't eaten. She pulled out the lunch she had packed, but the workload was already piling up. Meetings, calls, emails, customers—she didn't get a moment to breathe. Her lunch sat untouched beside her keyboard.

By the time she left the office, the city was cloaked in the darkness of approaching night. She leaned back in the car, exhaustion pulling at her, but her mind was already at home, thinking about dinner. Her legs ached as she unlocked the door, greeted by the silence of their empty apartment. She dropped her bag by the door and immediately headed for the kitchen. Morning dishes still needed washing, and she still had to chop vegetables for dinner.

The fatigue of the day clung to her like a heavy blanket, but she didn't pause. The rice cooker hummed as she stirred the curry, mentally organizing the rest of her tasks. Laundry needed folding, the floors needed sweeping. She hadn't even considered sitting down.

Manav walked in, greeted by the smell of cumin and spices. He glanced at the clean counters and the neatly set dinner table. "You've done all this already?" he said, taking a seat. She smiled weakly, setting his plate before him, then returning to the stove to finish her own.

The ache in her back was easily ignored. She knew she wasn't the only one. Millions of women, just like her, working tirelessly both in the office and at home, juggling roles without a word of complaint. They were the quiet warriors, managing everything—households, careers, relationships—without breaking.

But as she sat down to eat her now-cold dinner, Saanvi allowed herself a brief moment of thought. *This is life now,* she reminded herself. The day had ended much like it had begun, with her taking care of everything. And yet, she never once stopped to care for herself.

Her phone buzzed. A message from her college friend, Aditi: "*Girls' night this weekend?*" Saanvi's fingers hovered over the keys. She wanted to say yes, desperately needed a break. But the mental calculus

began automatically—work deadline on Monday, Manav's parents visiting next week, the house needed cleaning...

"*Maybe next time*," she typed, hitting send with a mix of relief and regret.

In the months that followed, the routine remained the same—only now, little Kartik's cries filled the house. Saanvi and Manav had welcomed a beautiful baby boy, Kartik.

Saanvi woke earlier and slept later; her responsibilities, after becoming a mother, grew heavier, but she managed them with all her strength.

***

From the day she was born, a tiny fist clutching his finger, Saanvi had been her father's star. He watched her devour books, her brow furrowed in concentration, her eyes alight with knowledge.

Every "Papa, I got an A!" echoed through the house, each accomplishment a tiny diamond he collected in his heart's treasure chest.

She passed her 12th Board exams with flying colours, and when the letter confirming her selection to Delhi University for her graduate program arrived, it was an ocean of pride. His little princess, the one who danced in rain puddles, was now a young girl carving her own path in the world. He saw in her a reflection of his own dreams, nurtured and blossoming beyond what he himself could have achieved.

But beyond her academic and professional triumphs, it was Saanvi's love that truly fueled his pride—her love for her family, her compassion for strangers, and her gentle touch that soothed anxieties. These qualities made her far greater than the sum of her achievements.He saw in her eyes a spark of the universe, a kindness that illuminated even the darkest corners.

He remembered late-night conversations, her head resting in his lap, sharing secrets and dreams. He remembered her laughter, like wind chimes tinkling in the breeze, and her tears, glistening like dewdrops on a rose.

The first day of her B.Sc. was a blend of nervous excitement and eager anticipation, marking the beginning of a new chapter in her life. Navigating the maze-like college buildings and getting lost more than once while searching for classrooms became a rite of passage.

Saanvi's footsteps echoed through the wide corridors of Delhi University, her sneakers squeaking faintly on the old stone floors as she wove her way through the crowd. The campus felt alive, like a living, breathing entity. Posters flapped gently on the bulletin boards, advertising debate clubs, drama societies, and volunteer groups. Her eyes darted between them, each offering a different adventure. Without hesitation, she signed her name to a few.

As she pushed her way through the crowd, Saanvi spotted a group of friends huddled together, laughing and chatting. They looked like they had known each other for years, and Saanvi felt a pang of longing. The group welcomed her with open arms, and soon they were all chatting like old friends.

The shared laughter, the hushed whispers, the collective groan when a particularly difficult assignment loomed—these were the moments that forged lifelong bonds.

Saanvi's college life at Delhi University was like a pressure cooker of emotions. Each day brought a fresh wave of feelings: excitement, anxiety, self-discovery, and everything in between.

The ATM beeped, spitting out crisp notes. Saanvi hesitated before taking the money, mentally calculating her budget for the week: textbooks, metro card top-up, and maybe one coffee at the new café near campus. She tucked the notes carefully into her wallet, a small thrill of independence coursing through her.

***

Time had cast a subtle shadow over the beautiful story of Saanvi. The laughter that used to echo through their home had become a distant memory, replaced by the hollow hum of unspoken words and the suffocating weight of a love that had gone cold after her marriage.

The concept of zero reminded her that sometimes the most profound truths are found in the spaces between—the silences and the pauses. She dreamed under a sky filled with constellations of promises, only to find them eclipsed by the darkness of unspoken words.

Saanvi stood at the kitchen counter, her fingers tracing the rim of a cold cup of tea. The steam had long dissipated, much like the warmth that once filled their home. She glanced at the clock—Manav should have been home an hour ago. The tick-tock of the second hand seemed louder in the empty room, a cruel reminder of time slipping away, of moments lost.

The front door creaked open, and Manav walked in, his shoulders slumped, his tie already loosened. He dropped his briefcase by the door without a second glance, his eyes glazed over with exhaustion. Saanvi's heart gave a familiar, painful twinge.

"Long day?" she asked, trying to keep her voice light, as if everything was still normal between them.

"Yeah," Manav mumbled, his response clipped. He moved past her to the refrigerator, grabbing a bottle of water. He didn't look at her, didn't notice the way her hand trembled as she held her cup.

"Let's have dinner together?" Saanvi offered, her voice quieter now, uncertainty creeping in. She could still remember the days when he would walk through the door with a smile, their evenings filled with laughter and stories.

"I already ate at the office," he replied, his tone indifferent as he unscrewed the cap and took a long sip.

"Oh," she said, her heart sinking. She hadn't even realized she'd been holding on to the hope that tonight might be different. "You could've called..."

"Sorry," he muttered, barely audible, his focus already shifting to his phone as it buzzed with notifications.

Saanvi's eyes shifted to the dining table, still set for two. The silverware glinted under the soft light, a mockery of the life they used

to share. She forced a smile, though it felt like her face might crack under the strain.

"Manav," she said, her voice firmer now, almost desperate, "do you remember when we used to sit out on the balcony and talk for hours? When we'd—"

"Can we not do this right now, Saanvi?" Manav interrupted, his eyes finally meeting hers, but there was no warmth in them, only exhaustion. "I'm tired. I just want to rest."

Her breath caught in her throat. The words she wanted to say—the words she had rehearsed so many times in her mind—died on her lips. Instead, she just nodded. Between what is said and not meant, and what is meant and not said, most of love is lost.

As she stood there, the silence between them grew heavier, more oppressive. The house, once filled with the sound of their laughter, now felt like a stranger's place—a hollow shell of what it once was. The clock on the wall ticked on, each second a reminder of how far apart they had drifted.

Later that night, after putting her son Kartik to sleep, Saanvi lay awake in bed, her back turned to Manav's. She could hear his steady breathing, feel the distance in the inches that separated them. Her mind wandered back to the early days of their marriage, to the way he used to hum their favorite song as he got ready in the morning, thinking she wasn't listening. But tonight, like so many other nights, there was only silence.

She closed her eyes, willing herself to sleep, but the ache in her chest refused to fade. The weight of unspoken words and unmet expectations pressed down on her, suffocating in its intensity. She reached out, her hand hovering above Manav's, just inches away, but then she pulled back, curling into herself. The thought of touching him, of feeling nothing in return, was too much to bear.

As she lay there, Saanvi realized that the rose of their love had withered. The petals, once soft and full, were now brittle, crumbling under the frost of neglect. No matter how much she yearned for

Manav's touch to be the rain that revived them, she knew deep down it wouldn't come.

They drifted through their days like ghosts in their own home, two ships passing in the night, their once-synchronized sails now moving in different directions. The sacred vows, etched in the crimson blood of the sindoor, were beginning to flake, telling stories of unfulfilled desires and broken promises.

In the mathematics of relationships, trust is the prime factor that multiplies love and divides misunderstandings. Saanvi held onto the trust in her heart, believing that one day everything would change and she would be happy again.

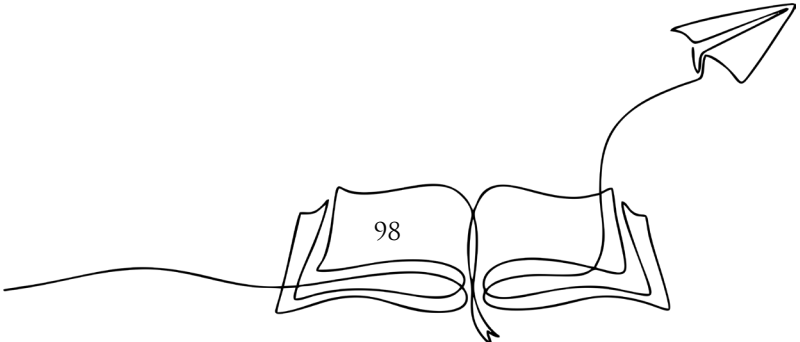
Like a wilting flower, she clung to the hope that Manav's touch would be like rain, but his indifference left her feeling parched and broken. She craved a storm—a tempest to shatter the stillness and force them to face the truth.

Manav, whom she had once thought her fiercest ally in the storms of life, now stood on the opposite side, his silence a shield blocking the torrent of her emotions.

It was painful to feel a connection fading with someone she had envisioned spending her entire life with. The realization that the future they had planned together might no longer be possible brought a deep sense of loss and sorrow. It was like watching a cherished dream slip away, leaving behind a void filled with memories and what-ifs.

And so, Saanvi, with her broken heart, was left with the most brutal truth: sometimes, love doesn't fade away in a flash, but in a slow, agonizing burn. It crumbles like a sandcastle under the relentless tide, leaving behind only the poignant ache of a memory, a love story written in the language of unspoken goodbyes.

She had loved with a love that was more than love.



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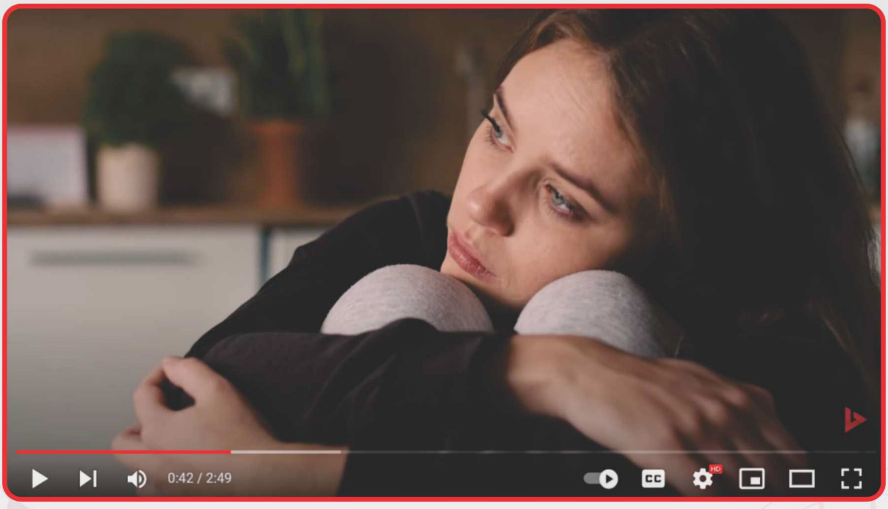
THE LEGACY OF YESTERDAY



Long Lost Love

OLYA GRAM & BHANU SRIVASTAV

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अतुलं तत्र तत्तेजः सर्वदेवशरीरजम्।
एकस्थं तदभून्नारी व्याप्तलोकत्रयं त्विषा।।
- श्री दुर्गासप्तशती, द्वितीयोऽध्यायः, छंद १३

सभी देवताओं से उत्पन्न हुआ और तीनों लोकों में व्याप्त
वह अतुल्य तेज जब एकत्रित हुआ तब वह नारी बना।
- श्री दुर्गासप्तशती, द्वितीयोऽध्यायः, छंद १३

The incomparable radiance that was born from all gods
and prevaded the three worlds with its effulgence...
became a woman.
- Shri Durga Saptashati, 2nd Chapter, Verse 13

The Mahatmya or Mahatmyam (Sanskrit: देवीमहात्म्यम्, devimahatmyam), also known as Durga Saptashati (दुर्गासप्तशती) or Chandi Patha (चण्डीपाठः), is a Hindu religious text describing the Goddess as the supreme power and creator of the universe. It is part of the Markandeya Purana and is estimated to have been composed in Sanskrit between 400 and 600 CE.
The text contains 700 verses arranged into 13 chapters. Along with the Bhagavata Purana and Shakta Upanishads, such as the Upanishad, it is one of the most important texts of the Shaktism (goddess) tradition within Hinduism.

Things left unsaid stay with us forever

I fell in love with a distant star,
A beacon in the endless night,
A glimmering pearl, so far afar,
That filled my soul with the purest light.

I fell in love with a distant star. It was instinctive, the way I fell for you—like an effortless intake of breath. You hold the key that unlocks things in me I never knew existed: catacombs and treasures no one has ever seen before, not even me.

That smile—when I saw it for the first time, I knew I wanted to see it for the rest of my life. The moon and the stars tried their best, but I couldn't look away from you. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at every sight.

I used to think magic didn't exist, but magic was all I saw when I saw you. I feel like I have crossed an infinite ocean of loneliness to find you. For me, you are a breath of forever in a world of the temporary.

It felt like I was loving you long before we even met. I love you in ways that even words cannot understand.

It's a frightening thought that in one fraction of a moment, you can fall into the kind of love that takes a lifetime to get over. I think I was made to love you. You are in my heart the way the sun rises in the day, and all the stars disappear. I saw nothing else when you were in front of me.

And suddenly, the lonely places were everywhere—in crowds, in sunsets, in nights, and everywhere you weren't.

I belong to you the way the moon belongs to the stars; we complement each other. When I fade to a crescent and darkness creeps across me, the stars in your eyes will bring me back, and once again, I will light up the sky.

No matter where I go or what I do, I am always thinking of you. Without you, nothing is ever enough. I could have the whole world, but I would still be left wanting. You flood my thoughts and fill my wide-awake dreams. I adore you to depths beyond what the eye can see. How strange it is to dream of you even when I am awake. You are not the girl of my dreams but the girl of every waking moment of every single day.

There is no escape. The whole world is drenched in the memories of you. You are my today and all of my tomorrows. I wanted you to know there will be a piece of you in me always. There will always be something between us. Whenever I look up at the moon and the stars, I'll think of you.

I love you with a deeper love than any human heart has ever known. I love with a soul that has lived a thousand lifetimes, always waiting to meet you again so I can promise to be yours forever. You are the last dream of my soul.

I am so afraid that time will steal you away. I can already hear its hurried footsteps. I don't know how to look at my life without seeing an inescapable absence of you. I am fading away slowly, and you are not even noticing.

I look alive, but I'm dead inside without you. In all of time, I wonder how many lives I will have to live until I find my way back to you. I was made and meant to look for you, wait for you, and become yours forever. We could be in love for a billion lifetimes, and I would still look at you as if for the first time. Life is too short for all the lives I have dreamed of living with you. Still, I would wait for you until eternity.

I exist in two places: here and where you are. You are written in my soul with permanent ink. My love for you will remain as infinite as the stars.

I wish time had better timing for you and me so that I could say to you, "Let's meet again for the first time."

I hope someday you'll find yourself in the story I wrote. And when you look between the lines, you will find me there. I am right there. So many people become songs, poetry, and stories. I made you all of them, but you will never know that my world is full of the ghosts of unspoken words and memories because the things left unsaid stay with us forever.

I know I've fallen in love with an impossibility...

Every writer fills their pen with the ink of their own soul and writes what is left unsaid. But your eyes stole all my words away. Those eyes of yours could swallow stars, galaxies, and universes. What hope did I ever have?

I may never find words beautiful enough to describe all you mean to me, but I will spend the rest of my life searching for them. I might be the writer, but you'll always be the words...

- Destiny

Thanks and Gratitude

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the rare individuals in my life who have listened without judgment, spoken without prejudice, helped without expecting anything in return, understood without pretension, and loved me unconditionally.

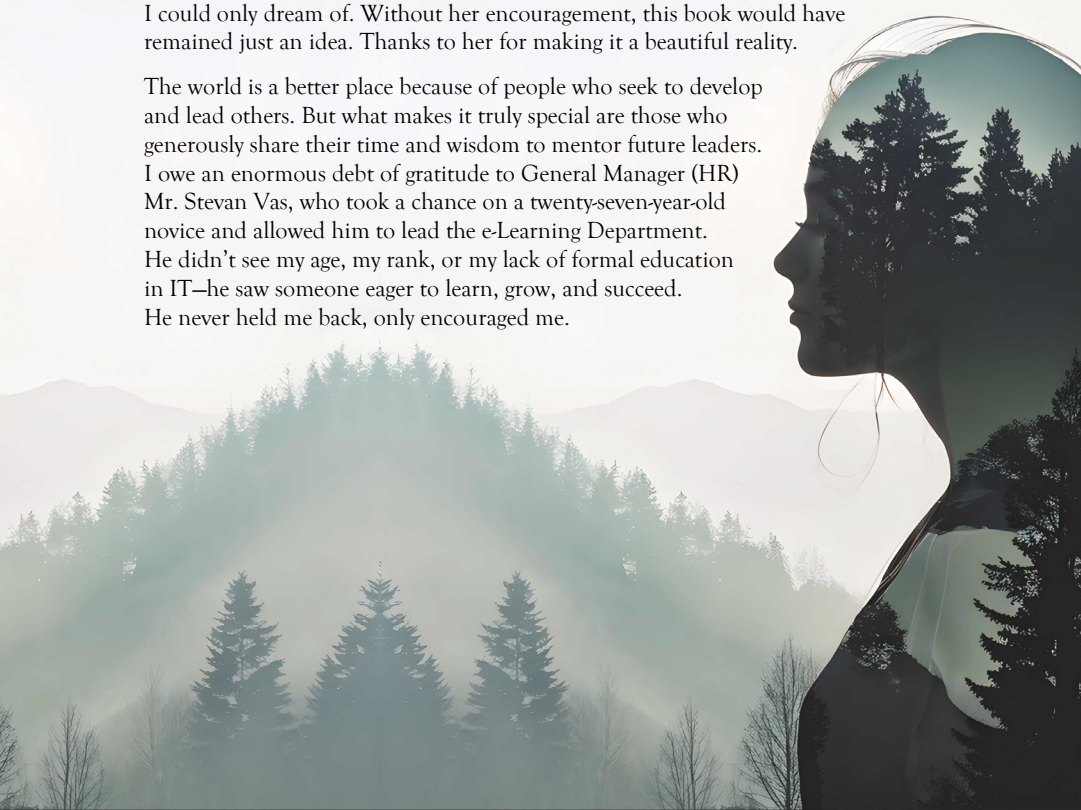
Thank you for being the love I didn't know I needed when I thought I didn't need love. It changed me, softened me, and, though I didn't realize it at the time, it saved me.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents and sister for their love and support. No parenting book in the world could have prepared them for my eccentricities.

Next, I offer my deepest thanks to Supergirl - Himani, for the incredible inspiration she has been to me. She is the finest, loveliest, kindest, and most beautiful person I've ever met, and even that feels like an understatement. I deeply regret not asking for her permission beforehand to draw inspiration from her for this novel. I know I should have, and for that, I sincerely apologize. The truth is, I was afraid of what her answer might be.

I am deeply grateful to Himani for her kindness and support. Her incredible contributions to the graphic design process brought this book to life in ways I could only dream of. Without her encouragement, this book would have remained just an idea. Thanks to her for making it a beautiful reality.

The world is a better place because of people who seek to develop and lead others. But what makes it truly special are those who generously share their time and wisdom to mentor future leaders. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to General Manager (HR) Mr. Stevan Vas, who took a chance on a twenty-seven-year-old novice and allowed him to lead the e-Learning Department. He didn't see my age, my rank, or my lack of formal education in IT—he saw someone eager to learn, grow, and succeed. He never held me back, only encouraged me.



I would also like to extend my thanks to Meena Kumar V, Bindu Mallikarjuna P, Anupriya, Divyashree Nayak, Chaitanya R, Sreeharsha B, Anand Kumar B, Manjunatha S, Ajay Dutt Tiwari, Richa Verma, Anjali Kumari, Anand Kumar Pareek, Shrijith S, Raghu Kiran S, Madhu, Shubham Jain, P. Jayashankar, S. Radha Krishna, Hanuwant, Mahesh Hegde, and the entire HR Department Team.

Additionally, I want to give special thanks to those who have continued to grow and help others grow: Poovazhagi Venkatchalam, Ankit Garg, Ankur Srivastava, Manali Rupani, Komal Sharma, Pramila Singh, Palash Hajela, Siddhant Bajpai, Triyaksh Mishra, Gaurav Tiwari, Divyanshu Shukla, Anurag Bara, Deepanshu Roy, Kajal Awasthi, Shailesh Kumar, Satish Kumar, Ashwani Kumar, Chandrakant Bharti, Pradeep Kumar, Nihal Bhandari, Urvashi Singh, Anita Gaur, Divya Bhattacharya, Anurag Singh Chauhan, Nishtha Shukla, Niharika Mishra, Vibha Shukla, Shipra Singh, Pallavi Srivastava, Chandani Malhotra, Shabnam, Amrita Shukla, and many other colleagues I have been privileged to work alongside and be inspired by.

I am deeply appreciative of kindness. I appreciate those who check in on me, send a quick message, or ask if I'm okay. I am grateful for everyone who has brightened my days. It's the little things that matter most in life.

I sincerely apologize if I've missed mentioning any names, but each and every one of you holds a special place in my heart. If I forgot anyone, please forgive me.

Finally, thank you to those who entered my life and made it better, and to those who left and made it amazing.

About the Author

Bhanu Srivastav is an author who pushes the boundaries of possibility at the intersection of technology, spirituality, and human connection. A visionary from India, Bhanu is the founder of Infinity, an innovative Artificial Intelligence company, which he established after leaving behind a flourishing banking career. His remarkable transition from a managerial role in the public sector to a thought leader in AI reflects his deep passion for expanding what's possible in both technology and personal growth.

With a foundation in Mechanical Engineering, Bhanu's academic achievements are vast and varied. He holds two Post Graduate Diplomas, two Post Graduate Degrees, and over a hundred certifications in Information Technology. He is also a licensed ISO 27001 Information Security Lead Auditor and Certified Ethical Hacker. His published research papers in international journals on Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning add further depth to his expertise. A proud alumnus of ASCI Hyderabad, Bhanu's academic and professional journey reflects his relentless pursuit of knowledge.

As an author, Bhanu bridges fiction and non-fiction, offering readers both engaging stories and insightful explorations of contemporary issues. His upcoming projects focus on Indian spirituality, combining traditional wisdom with modern research. A deep thinker with a philanthropic spirit, Bhanu uses his writing, love for music, and advanced technical skills to make a meaningful impact on society, supporting those in need through various initiatives.

When he isn't writing or working, Bhanu enjoys cooking and immersing himself in music, both of which fuel his creativity.

Follow Bhanu Srivastav to stay connected with his latest literary works, research, and life-changing endeavors.

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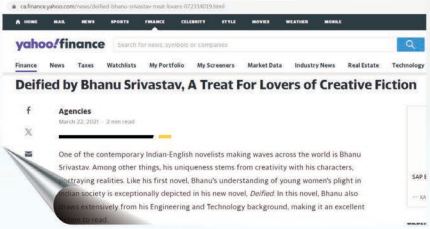
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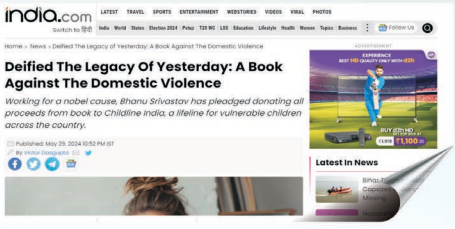
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Working for a nobel cause, Bhanu Srivastav has pleadged donating all proceeds from book to Childline India, a lifeline for vulnerable children across the country.
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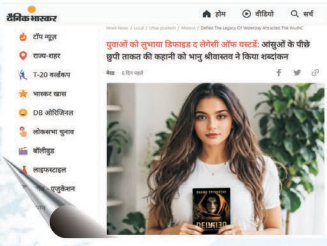

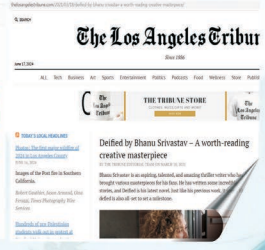

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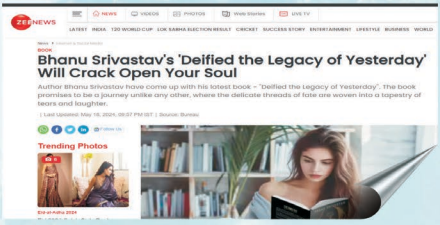

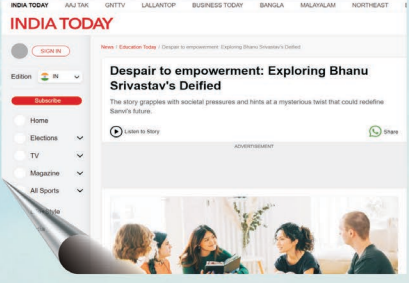
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Dear Readers of Deified,

From the bottom of my heart, thank you. Your love for this story has been overwhelming and heartwarming. In just a few days, your love and praise have brought this novel to life in ways I never imagined.

However, what truly matters most to me is your genuine experience. Deified wasn't written for accolades, but to move you, to spark a connection. That's why I want to offer a **unique guarantee: a 30-Day Money Back Guarantee.**

Forget online reviews, news articles or customer testimonials. This story is for you. If Deified resonates with your soul, if it takes you on a journey you cherish, then please, keep it.

But if, after diving into the world I've created, you don't feel that spark, simply let me know within 30 days of purchase. There are no questions asked, no hard feelings. You can send an email to **hello@deified.co.in** or a WhatsApp message to **7800000868.**

Here's the reason for this guarantee: the proceeds from Deified go directly to Childline India, an organization dedicated to helping children in need. I wouldn't want a single unhappy reader's money to contribute to this cause. I want every penny to come from a place of love and satisfaction, not disappointment.

With deepest gratitude,

Bhanu Srivastava

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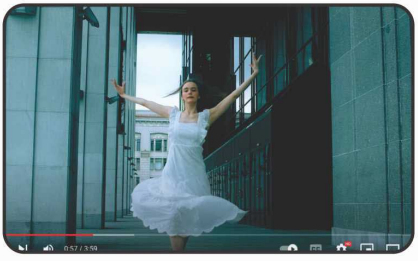
Experience the Exclusive Playlist of Deified

We're thrilled to share something special with you!

As you journey through the pages of Deified The Legacy of Yesterday, we've crafted a playlist of 15 songs just for you. Each track is a reflection of the emotions, themes, and story woven into the book, created to enhance your reading experience.

Let the music take you deeper into the world of Deified, where every note resonates with the legacy of yesterday.

Happy listening!



Deified Songs

The Backbenchers

15 videos 115k views Last updated on Aug 11, 2024

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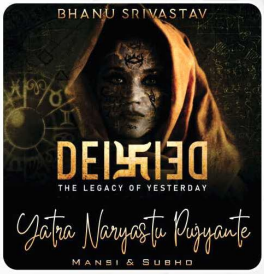

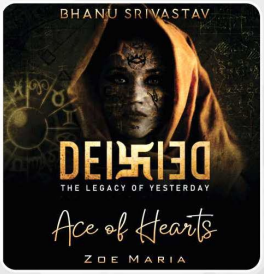

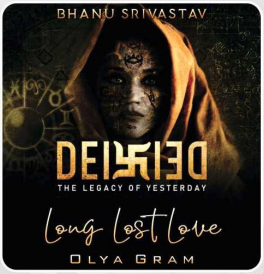

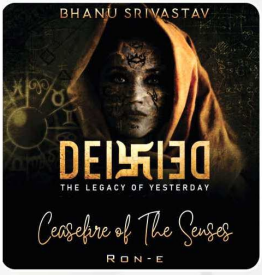

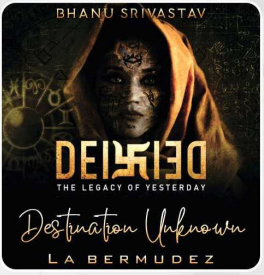

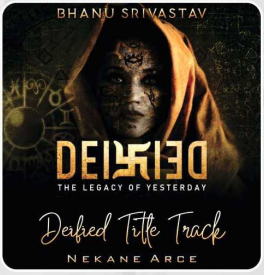

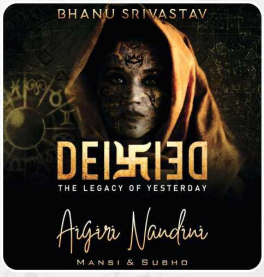

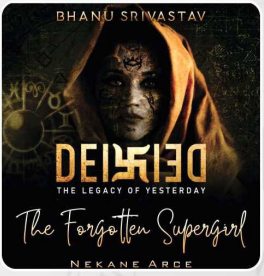

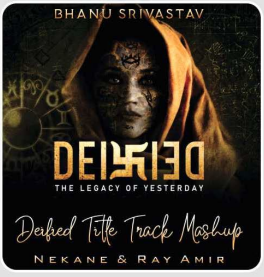

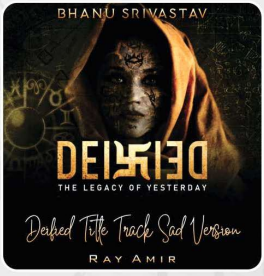

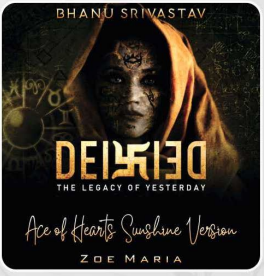

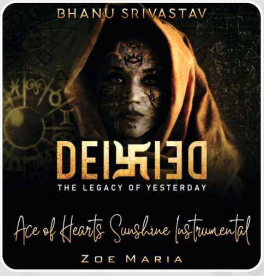

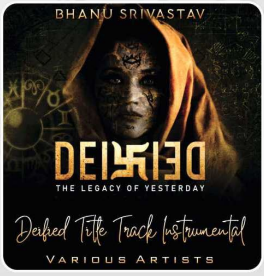

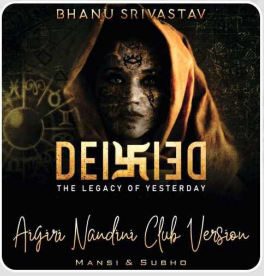

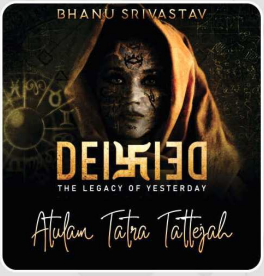

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Don't miss out on all the magic and excitement that awaits!

To my Incredible Readers,

This isn't goodbye, but a heartfelt thank you.

As you turn the final page, a bittersweet feeling washes over you. You've shared laughter and tears with these characters, their struggles resonating with your own. But the story doesn't end here. With every purchase of this book, you become a part of something bigger.

All the royalties from this novel will be donated to Childline India, an organization that fights for the future - the future held in the innocent eyes of countless children. These are children who deserve a safe space, a chance to dream, a childhood free from fear. Through Childline, you can offer them that.

Imagine a child, alone and afraid, reaching out for help. With your support, Childline India can be their answer. A listening ear, a warm embrace, a beacon of hope in the darkest of times.

This story may have touched your heart, but together, we can touch the lives of those who need it most. Each book purchased is a tiny ripple creating a wave of change. So, thank you for reading, and thank you for making a difference. Because in the end, the greatest stories are the ones we write together.

Warmly,

Bhanu Srivastav

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